CANTZ

# Sigmar Polke

## The Three Lies of Painting

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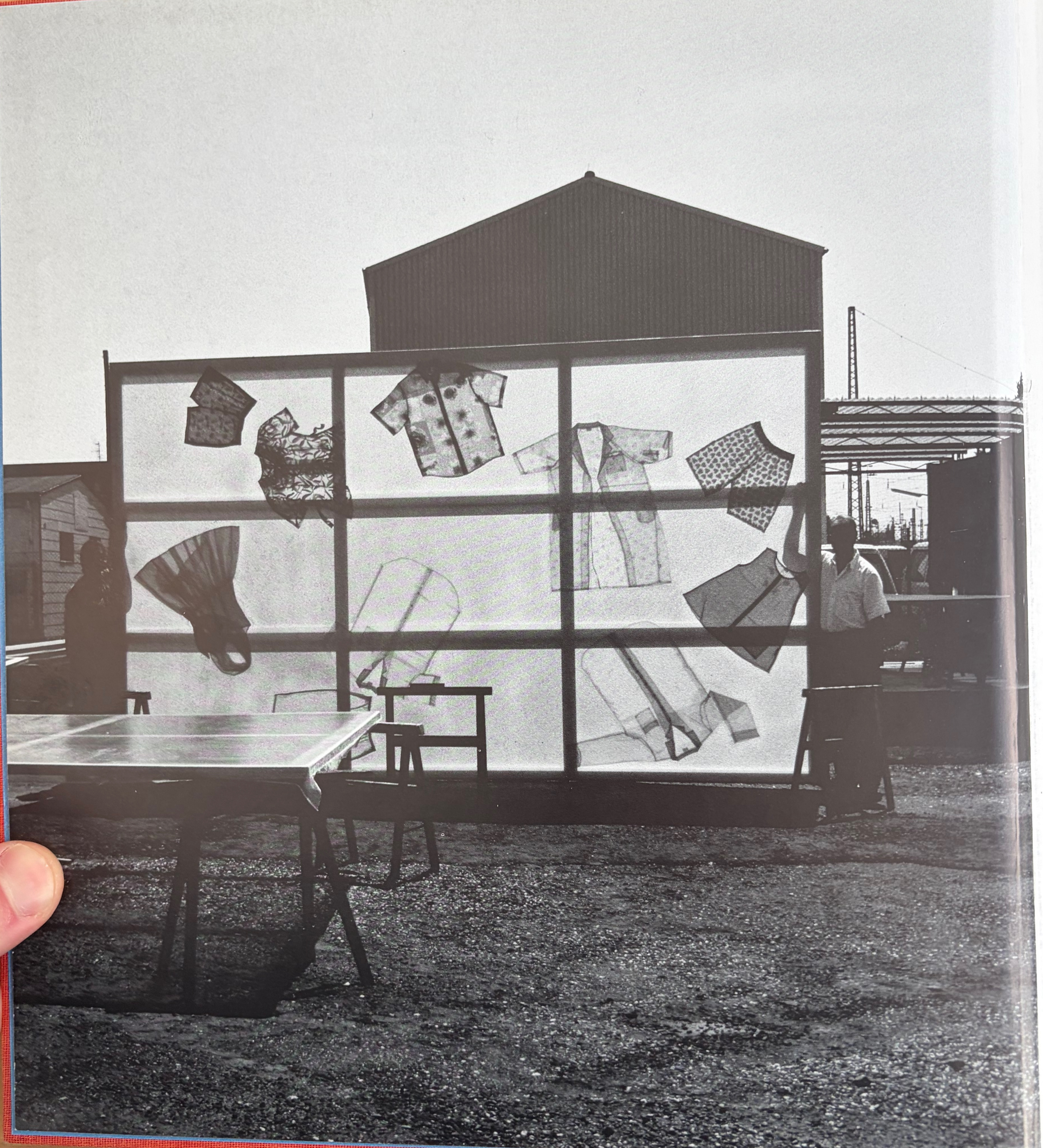
# Sigmar Polke



# Sigmar Polke

## The Three Lies of Painting

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## Artist's acknowledgements

*"Why the anger in your eyes?*
*Have I done you some good turn?"*

I wish to thank Wenzel Jacob, Director of the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle, and his outstanding team for the highly professional planning, development and conduct of this exhibition.

Thanks are due as well to Guy Tosatto, Director of the Carré d'Art in Nîmes, whose essay in the catalogue accompanying the 1994 exhibition there, *Les trois mensonges de la peinture,* gave me the idea to use *The Three Lies of Painting* as the exhibition title.

I am grateful to Martin Hentschel, who beginning in 1990 developed the exhibition concept in the course of several years of work based upon his dissertation, *Die Ordnung des Heterogenen. Sigmar Polkes Werk bis 1986,* and provided important impulses towards the realisation of the exhibition.

Special thanks are due in particular to Project Manager Susanne Kleine, with whom I truly enjoyed working in an atmosphere of friendship. As mediator between the Kunsthalle and me, she succeeded even during the difficult preparatory phase in achieving the greatest possible degree of accord. She has made an essential contribution to the success of *The Three Lies of Painting*.

I would like to thank the catalogue department, Petra Kruse and Dorothee von Drachenfels, whose work I admire tremendously.

My thanks go as well to the graphic designers Nero Kühle and Lena Mozer as well as to everyone else involved in a variety of different ways in the preparations for this exhibition.

*"Why the anger in your eyes?*
*Have I done you some good turn?"*

# Preface

*We don't need paintings,*
*we don't need painters and*
*we don't need artists.*

...

*Take it with a grain of salt!*

Only a few lines separate these two remarks cited from an interview with Sigmar Polke. With apparent ease he switches from a radical stance to one devoid of all passion. Again and again, the artist irritates his public with role changes of this kind. Polke is a player. Nothing is more alien to him than definitive clarity. He plays with meanings, with words, with categories. He loves alluding to literature, to art history, to history in general; he experiments and provokes with new materials. Polke combines totally different pictorial contents, establishing patterns of meaning that appear absurd at first glance but often reveal more profound relationships. Characterised by irony and clever wit, his art is outstanding and highly significant. Since the 1960s, Polke has exercised an essential influence in the shaping of German art while gaining acclaim through exhibitions and awards both in Germany and abroad. It is therefore a great pleasure for us to be able to honour the artist with the most extensive retrospective of his work ever exhibited.

We are particularly pleased that the exhibition is being shown both in Bonn and – in a somewhat different form – in Berlin, thus not only forging a bridgehead between the old and new capitals but paying tribute to Polke's importance for post-war art and as a commentator on recent history.

This exhibition coincides with the 5th anniversary of the opening of the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn. For the Nationalgalerie Berlin, the exhibition represents the first in a planned series of exhibitions at the Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart.

First and foremost, we wish to thank Sigmar Polke himself for helping make the exhibition possible. Despite the fears of sceptics, our work with the artist proved to be a convivial, constructive experience characterised by a spirit of friendship.

It goes without saying, however, that an undertaking of this magnitude would have been inconceivable without the support and cooperation of many national and

international private and institutional donors. I would like to thank everyone who placed their trust in us and made works in their possession available to Sigmar Polke and his exhibition.

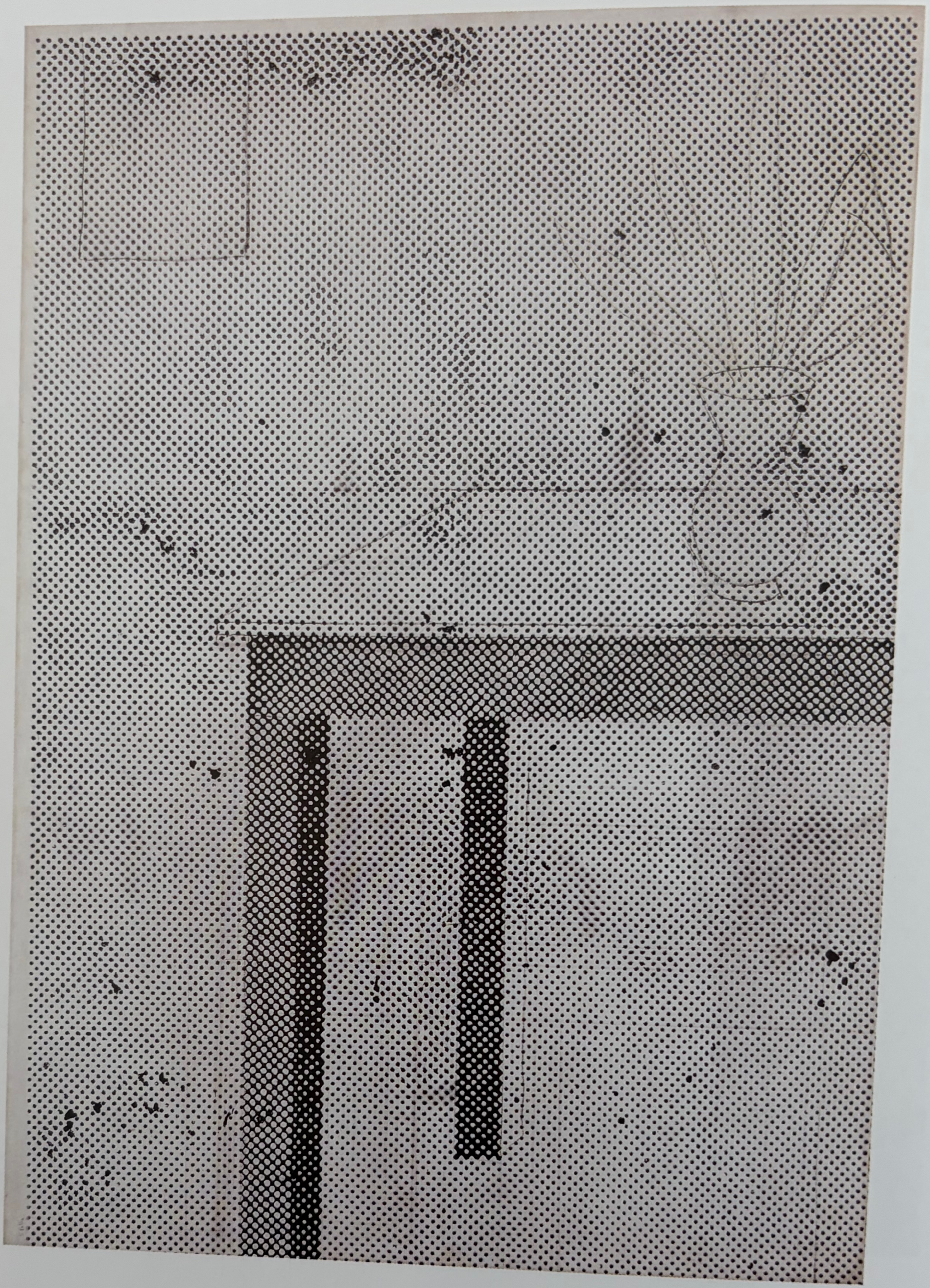
We are grateful to curator Martin Hentschel, who planned and organised the exhibition in cooperation with the artist and provided the catalogue concept. As Project Manager, Susanne Kleine was responsible for the organisation and coordination of the exhibition in Bonn. Britta Schmitz has guided the project to success in Berlin. We thank them both for their dedication and commitment.

Wenzel Jacob
Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle
der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn

Peter-Klaus Schuster
Nationalgalerie Berlin

Engel 1962

Das Palmen-Bild 1964

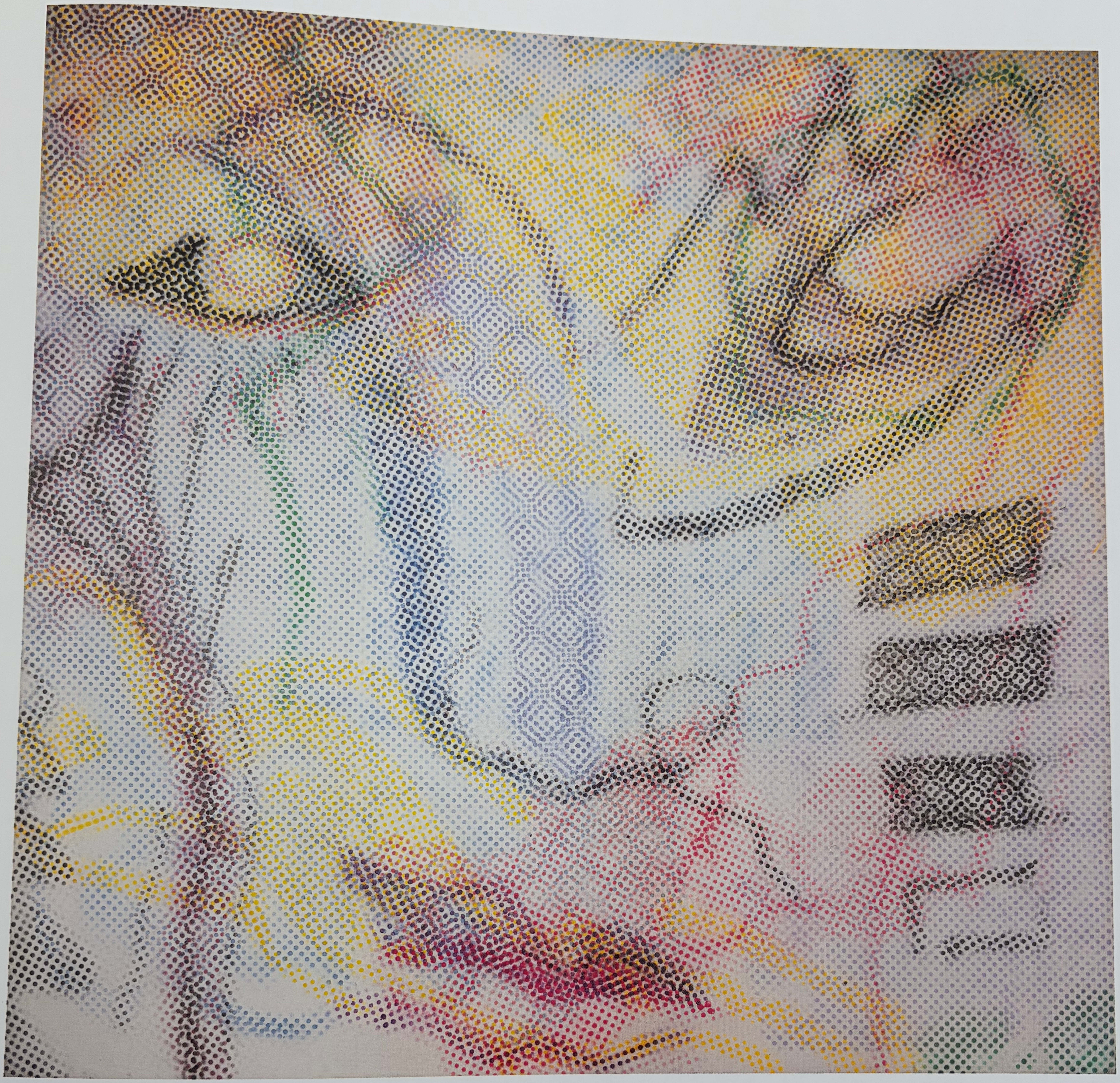




Tisch 1963

Bohnen 1965

Frau im Spiegel 1966



Kopf 1966

Interieur 1965

MARTIN HENTSCHEL

# Solve et Coagula
## On Sigmar Polke's Work

*At this time he found everywhere objects already known to him but marvellously mingled and mated, and strange vicissitudes often arose within him. Soon he became aware of the inter-relation of all things, of conjunctions, of coincidences. Ere long he saw nothing singly.*
Novalis, *The Disciples at Saïs*

### 1. 'German Pop' and Fluxus: A New Era Begins in Düsseldorf

1 Sigmar Polke in front of the shop window at the Kaiserstraße exhibition, 1963

The harbingers of the new era were the Manfred Kuttner, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter and the moment came in spring 1963 with their decision to put on their own exhibition. Polke reconnoitred an empty butcher's shop in Kaiserstraße 31A in Düsseldorf (illus. 1). The location was familiar: diagonally opposite it was Galerie 22 which, under the direction of Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, had been the venue in May 1960 for Germany's first sight of the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly. The spring board for the four up and coming young artists was the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf where they had met in 1961 as students of Karl-Otto Götz. Polke had already completed an earlier trial semester with Gerhard Hoehme, and was later to study with him again.

In order to leave the public in no doubt as to the serious artistic intent behind the exhibition, the participants stated in no uncertain terms that this event was not to be 'commercial in nature but purely demonstrative.'[1] At the same time this was a strategy designed to preclude commercial failure. The artists' feel for the signs of the time is evident from the wording on the invitations to what was to become a legendary exhibition. These were decorated with a band revealing the participants' awareness of the latest currents in the art world, then emerging in New York and Paris: POP ART, JUNK CULTURE, NOUVEAU REALISME, COMMON OBJECT PAINTING, NEO DADA, NEW VULGARISMUS, ANTIKUNST, KNOW-NOTHING-GENRE. The artists were well informed, above all through the Swiss journal *Art International*, which, as early as the beginning of 1962, had published an article by Max Kozloff with the title: "'Pop' Culture, Metaphysical Disgust and the New Vulgarians."[2]

However, it was the January 1963 edition of *Art International* – devoted almost entirely to Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme – that was to create the greatest impact. Barbara Rose's major article in this edition, 'Dada then and now', was preceded by

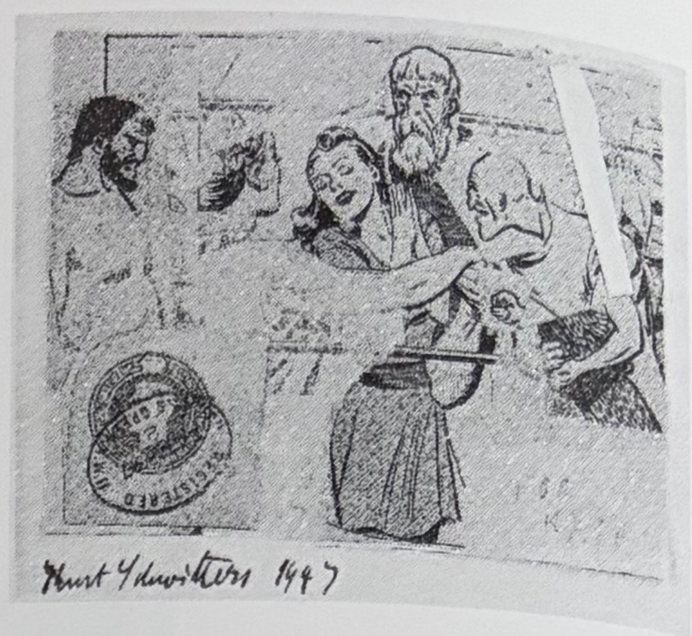
1 Press release to the *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau*; see Harten 1986, p. 15, and Hentschel 1991, pp. 56f.
2 *Art International*, 6 (1962), pp. 34 – 36

Kurt Schwitters' renowned collage, *For Käte*, 1947, now regarded as Pop Art *avant la lettre*[3]: with its ironic high spirits this work was bound to have been of interest to Polke (illus. 2). As it happens, the same page also bears a motto with the very words that appeared on the invitations to the Kaiserstraße exhibition, right down to the bald 'Know-nothing-genre.' Rose's text, now soberly perspicacious, now emphatic in tone, takes the once derogatory designation Neo-Dada and uses it as a foil to define and turn the spotlight on the new Pop Art movement, convincingly demonstrating to the journal's young German readers that something radically new was happening on the other side of the Atlantic. The press release for the exhibition, signed on behalf of all the participants by Gerhard Richter, was worded accordingly: "The value of the exhibition derives from the themes of the works on show. For the first time in Germany, these will include works that may be described as Pop Art, Imperialist or Capitalist Realism, New Sobriety, Naturalism, German Pop and the like. Pop Art recognises the modern mass media as a genuine cultural phenomenon and draws, with artifice, on the attributes, formulations and contents of the modern mass media for its own artistic expression. Thus it is changing the face of modern painting, heralding an aesthetic revolution." The vocabulary used was both drastic and uninhibited. The writers were at pains to state that Pop Art was "not an American import," declaring that on the contrary it was a matter of the "independent and organic" growth of art in Germany.[4]

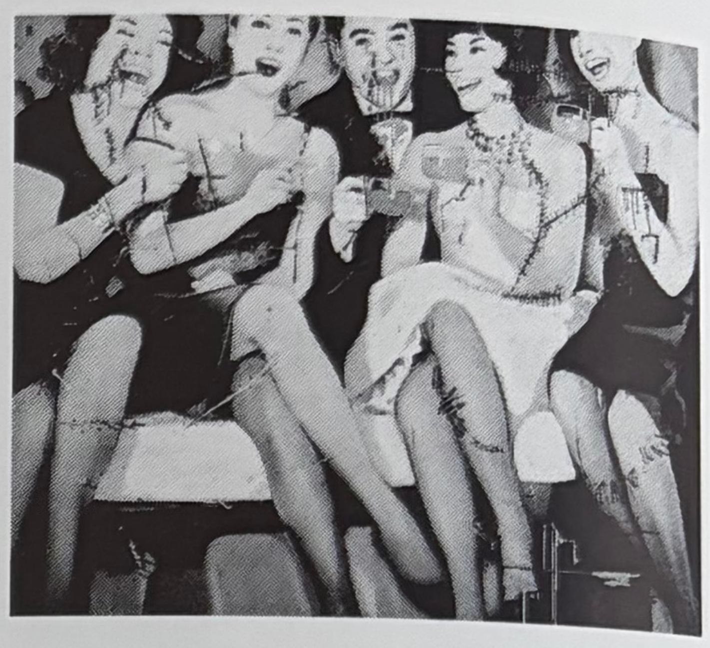
It is no longer possible to say for certain which works Polke showed at the exhibition. Yvonne Friedrichs' review referred to Polke's work: "The Silesian Sigmar Polke, born 1941, goes back to 'a child's earliest efforts at painting' in his 'work on' existing magazine and advertising pictures. Thus the printed picture of a pretty model (from a fashion magazine) is blurred with turpentine and becomes a 'Madonna.' Details of grisly pictures from crime stories are tellingly reproduced."[5]

A comparison of Polke's work with that of Gerhard Richter at the time points up clear differences between the two. Richter's *Erschießung* [Shooting] and *Party* (illus. 3) – both from 1962 and included in the Kaiserstraße exhibition – are entirely socio-critical: thus the 'party' guests, typical symbols of the emerging affluent society, are wounded by aggressive cuts into the canvas. Red paint drips like blood from the hero's mouth and from where the cuts have been sewn together again. Here Richter is taking Lucio Fontana's method (employed by the latter to extend the picture in terms of an over-arching concept of space) and using it 'against' the motif. From the outset, any such palpable moral undertone had no place in Polke's work. His two earliest surviving works, *Bierseidel* [Beer Mug] and *Engel* [Angels: illus. 4], both from 1962, already point unmistakably towards that sense of ironic distance which was soon to emerge as central to Polke's work.

There is also irony in the term 'Capitalist Realism,' the only label still shared by these artists today. As it became increasingly evident over the years that art critics




2 Kurt Schwitters, *For Käte*, 1947. Private collection



3 Gerhard Richter, *Party*, 1962. Collection of Frieder Burda

4 *Engel*, 1962. Karin Polke

3 See, amongst others, Lippard 1966, p. 11
4 Mention need only be made here in passing of the fact that British Pop Art was of course much earlier off the mark than American Pop Art, since at the time, international art criticism focused exclusively on the USA as the relevant edition of Art International amply demonstrates.
5 Rheinische Post, May 16, 1963

5 *Festum Festorum Fluxus*, Staatl. Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, 2/3 February 1963

were using the term as a descriptor of style, the artists involved sought to distance themselves from it. Yet, as a term, 'Capitalist Realism' does reflect the tenor of picture production at the time, for as the converse of 'Socialist Realism,' it takes the clichés of everyday life and casts them in a critical rather than in a heroic light; it displays an ironically ambivalent attitude to the products of the everyday world as opposed to their apotheosis in Pop Art; and not least, it opposes the abstract art of the fifties.

In fact this last point should not be underestimated, for as Pop Art was emerging so, too, did another movement that was rubbing just as strongly the wrong way against *peinture*, supposedly petrified in its own smugness, and against the dogma of subjectivity and the self-conscious artistic ego: this movement was Fluxus. As late as 1959, on the occasion of *documenta II* in Kassel, abstract art was widely hailed as a 'world language,'[6] because it was genuinely seen as the counterpart to the newly-won freedoms of the economic miracle and democracy.[7] It is true, there were already critical voices from within the ranks, but these were isolated as yet. Werner Haftmann who rather tersely commented in the *documenta* catalogue that "art has become abstract" warned at the same time against the "dangers of perversion": he saw "a language that owes its existence to the strength of artists' individuality" as being threatened by the hoards climbing on the band-wagon: "And so it is, that even now, a means of expression that has taken so much commitment, suffering and life's blood to achieve, is already turning either into cosily lyrical or pompous 'Biedermeierei': the Tachiste Professor or the wolf in sheep's clothing."[8]

Like Pop Art, so too Fluxus was formulated by its relationship to concrete reality, which in itself has nothing to do with the heights of lyrical abstraction; of the two, Fluxus was much more radical in tone. On 9th June 1962, the Lithuanian-American George Maciunas, regarded now as the founding spirit of Fluxus, held a lecture in the Galerie Parnaß in Wuppertal called 'Neo-Dada in the United States.' In this he made a statement that signalled verbally the changing paradigms that had so far found expression in Actions, in musical Events in Germany and in Happenings in the USA: "In order to establish closer contact with reality, the art-nihilist either produces anti-art or nothing – just banalities."[9] In Maciunas' view: "Eating noises are more concrete than the trained singing voice," a blow from a hammer, a kick against the piano are more concrete than the notes that can be produced by playing the piano's keys: contentions that were then actively lived out in Fluxus-Events.

On 16th June 1962 the Düsseldorf Kammerspiele was the venue for the Fluxus-Event 'Neo-Dada in Music' and a little over six months later, on 2nd and 3rd February 1963, the same protagonists met in the Kunstakademie for the large-scale *Festum Festorum Fluxus* (illus. 5). Amongst others the participants included Tomas Schmit, Emmett Williams, Arthur Köpcke, Nam June Paik, Daniel Spoerri, Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Wolf Vostell, Joseph Beuys and George Maciunas: major players in the dissemination of Fluxus. The event took place under the auspices of

6 See Glozer 1981, pp. 172ff.
7 See Hermand 1978, pp. 149ff.
8 Haftmann 1959, p. 18
9 Baltzer, Biermann 1980, p. 196

Beuys in his capacity as professor at the Kunstakademie and he designated this "instrumental theatre" as it was called in the pre-publicity as a "colloquium."

There can be no doubt that this event was deeply disturbing to our 'Capitalist Realists': for the students studying under Karl-Otto Götz it must have seemed like one provocation after the other, questioning the academic teaching they were receiving.[10] Looking back, Polke made the comment that "Fluxus was very important, as was Dada,"[11] and on another occasion recalled the major exhibition held in Düsseldorf in 1958 honouring the Dada movement.[12] Dieter Hülsmanns, who conducted a conversation with Polke in his studio in 1966, concluded that "When he [...] was confronted in 1963 with a different kind of artistic discourse, he was so impressed that it was hard for him to go on with what he had thought and done so far."[13]

The term Neo-Dada was applied equally to Fluxus and Pop Art at the time, and with good reason too. In the context of the Pop Art debate instigated by the journal *das kunstwerk* in April 1964, the art critic Franz Roh posed the question as to whether "this is not a kind of Neo-Dada which says that you can use the most banal, everyday means to give voice to all-too fathomable humour?"[14] And indeed Pop Art and Dada are linked by humour, the way they relish banalities, life in the big city and the advertising slogans that go with this. The links between Fluxus and Dada go even deeper. Maciunas took the lexical meaning of the word 'Fluxus' as his starting point: "A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part."[15] This in itself brings to mind Hans Arp's description of Dadaist simultaneous poetry: it "comes directly from the poet's bowels or other organs."[16] The provocative tumult which the Dadaists released in their soirées, was echoed in the 'parallel-performances' of Fluxus, where different actors simultaneously performed diverse actions, bordering on nonsense.

Like Dada, Fluxus works with chance; both movements make much of art willingly subsumed in life and deny the authorial subjectivity of the artist. And lastly, along with Pop Art, they reject traditional painting; its supposed bloodlessness is the basis for their declared preference for the trivial and the banal. The similarity is no coincidence. Although it is true that Dada had already severely curtailed the validity of a whole range of paradigms – be it artistic autonomy, originality, continuity, subjectivity or the divisions between high and popular culture – the conservative atmosphere of the post-war years and its "stuffy culture of repression"[17] virtually reinstated these notions in their entirety. This was what led in the early sixties to the feeling of a "second zero hour"[18] that made it possible to dare a renewed attack on art as an institution.

**2. Reconnoitring the Living Room – Niches in the Advertising World**

The Fluxus shower which descended on Düsseldorf in 1963 fell on fertile ground as far as Sigmar Polke was concerned. It perfectly met his own anarchic spirit and humour, which may perhaps best be described by the following anecdote.

10 Campbell (1996) has also recently taken this view
11 Parkett, no. 26 (1990), p. 7
12 In conversation with the author on February 21, 1997. (Dada-Dokumente einer Bewegung, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen/Kunsthalle Düsseldorf 1958)
13 Hülsmanns 1966
14 *das kunstwerk*, 10/XVII, April 1964, p. 31
15 George Maciunas, Manifest, Sonderdruck Fluxus 1963, repr. in: Becker, Vostell 1965, p. 203
16 Quoted in Richter 1973, p. 28
17 Heubach 1986, p. 113
18 Belting 1989, p. 20

The art dealer Alfred Schmela and his wife had just moved into a new flat in Luegplatz. His widow later described the situation: “The move was easy because we had very little. Alfred couldn’t stand furniture because it spoilt walls that could be used for art. I had just inherited a large cupboard, which we pushed from one room to the next, but it was always getting in the way of the art. [...] Besides this, all I had was one little wardrobe. Polke visited us and said ‘Is that all you’ve got?’ And with that, he painted me a matching wardrobe with two keyholes.”[19]

The facts are significant: a thumb-nail sketch of Polke’s perceptive reaction to any given situation, here to the competition between art and furniture. The painting *Schrank*, 1963, [Wardrobe: see p. 14] presented a confident, humorous solution in the sense that the work appears to mediate between the two contradictory interests: but in reality both demands are ironically sold short. On the one hand, the work seems to be a *trompe l’œil*, mimicking reality with its shiny surface and suggestion of slightly open door and keyholes. On the other hand this impression is immediately contradicted insofar as the minimal depths of the picture carrier undeniably induces a response whereby the modus of the painting becomes its meaning.

*Goethes Werke*, [Goethe’s Works] also from 1963 [see p. 15], are similarly ambiguous – not that anyone could seriously doubt that this is an easel painting; yet the format and the plasticity of the books’ spines are somehow roguishly insistent on being viewed as real books: an ironic comment on the mahogany veneer ‘mock culture’ that took such firm hold of West German furnishings in the fifties before being contained in the showrooms of the furniture industry.

Uwe Japp defines the context of irony as follows: “Irony always involves a self and another party, which present as a unit. This unity is a pretend unity, a unity as though.”[20] Although irony is linguistic in origin, it also proves to be a visual impulse that may make itself felt in many directions. It is hardly surprising that Polke went into it with some intensity from the outset for irony expresses itself in its ‘non-actuality’ and was a particularly effective counterbalance to the atmosphere of the late fifties “that were dominated by wasted existentialism emasculated by Christianity, by militant bigotry and by a blinkered terror of the positive, by ‘actuality’ and ‘depths.’”[21]

The materials that Polke chose to work with were similarly oppositional. His use of lacquer, as in the examples already mentioned here, ran counter to the notion of *peinture* for lacquer barely allows of modulation. The dispersion paints that he often used were dismissed as inferior because of their poor light resistance. And lastly his use of printed fabrics was certainly breaching a taboo. If one had to descend into the realms of the everyday world then it was supposedly the artist’s job to leave his or her mark on them. In the fifties Willi Baumeister designed curtain materials, Fritz Winter and K. H. Sonderborg created designs for the Göppingen Calico and Leatherette Works.[22] These were in themselves simply attempts by Bauhaus epigones

19 Baum 1989, p. 231
20 Japp 1983, p. 29
21 Heubach 1986, p. 114
22 Borngräber 1986, pp. 358, 361

to revive the violated messianic notion of standardising the taste of an entire society, with their own artistic originality guaranteeing the overall cultural level. The opposite path, where an artist would take on board the commonplace designs of the consumer society hardly seemed viable before the early sixties. It was not compatible with the obsolete, yet still virulent, misconception of the artist creating as out of nothingness[23] and whose initial spark is dependent on the white canvas.

### *Early Fabric Pictures: Exoticism and Idylls*

This must have made it all the more vexing when Polke painted his first fabric picture, *Das Palmen-Bild* [The Palm Painting: see p. 11] in 1964. In the words of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh: "The picture carrier is released from its objective, anonymous function [...]."[24] The fabric in question is patterned with a stripe, somewhat reminiscent of wood grain. Polke filled the lower third with a diagonal ochre and white field representing a sand dune. Above this two palm trees bend towards one another. They are only representational to the point of being recognisable. Thus in its own way the painting becomes one with the pattern on the fabric: the 'beautiful lines' of the palm trunks tend to the ornamental and in this sense also tie in with the colours of the fabric. Thus the picture ground becomes pictorial and, as such, brings to mind notions of 'jungle,' and, vice versa, the painting itself merges into the rampantly visual patterning of the fabric. And furthermore the painted elements reveal the concealed exoticism behind the pattern used for this fabric – the exotic, the romantic, the rustic: the moods used in bourgeois interiors to escape the monotony of normality. However, with regard to taste and choice, it is supposedly crucial that these are only drawn on with a level of propriety that precludes any suspicion of kitsch. Polke destroys this tacit agreement by imposing the false scenario of his painting on the
pattern of the fabric. Thus the 'pretend unity' peculiar to irony comes into play once
more.

A whole range of motifs that Polke embraces in his visual world in the sixties
seem like collections of finds from reconnaissance missions in petit bourgeois, Ger-
man living rooms. And it is not by chance that 'the exotic' crops up so frequently.
This is wholly in keeping with the conservatism of any emergant affluent society
which first finds expression within the individual members' own four walls. In this
context the exotic takes on the role of a projection screen. As yet, foreign travel is
beyond the means of most people, so the only thing to do is to create a visual 'idyll'
in one's own "interior space"[25] by incorporating some touch of foreignness, fleet-
ingly glimpsed in travel brochures

A number of Polke's works responded to this situation. For example, his *Palmen-*
*bild mit Gitter*, 1967 [Palm Painting with Trellis: see p. 168], alludes to the homely
trellis as found in petit bourgeois arbours. Instead of roses this one is adorned with one
small picture showing a palm tree and the sea. The painting itself is kidney-shaped,
echoing the kidney-shaped tables that today seem synonymous with German taste in

23 'Original producing is not dependent on comparable ability, in this sense the original artist can do nothing at a high level.' Baumeister 1947, p. 155
24 Buchloh 1976, p. 143
25 Bernhard 1977, pp. 106f.

6 *Flamingos*, 1966.
Collection of Uli Knecht

the 1950s. And in this sense the *Palmenbild mit Gitter* shows how idyll and exoticism go hand in hand. And again there is the 'pretend unity,' here revealing exoticism and idyll as issuing from one and the same thought process.

Somewhat milder, on the other hand, is the picture *Liebespaar*, 1967 [Lovers: see p. 19], which again takes up the motif of the palm tree – now plus a tender sunset. Yet the couple that give the picture its name are no less clichéd than their alter ego, that place where escapist fantasies collect together. The extensive blank regions on the picture show that both images may be seen as projections: motifs that apparently appear and disappear of their own accord: a fine line comes into sight, develops into shading, reduces and retreats again.

Flamingos, like palm trees, come under the heading 'exotic' and still today – as numerous eponymous nightclubs prove – lend exoticism a tinge of the erotic. Polke's picture *Flamingos,* 1966 (illus. 6), was originally part of his *Vitrinenstück* [Showcase Piece] installation, which will be discussed later here. *Flamingos* was sold separately from the rest of the piece but its original setting states that it was painted "at the command of higher beings": a formula that the artist uses to cast ironic doubt on his own authorship. This may be seen as a self-protection strategy, for the picture plainly laid itself open to accusations of kitsch, going further than any other of the creations that were coming out in the name of Pop Art.

Two years later the flamingo turns into a heron: a thoroughly homey bird. Although it has a straight beak the curve of its neck is distinctly reminiscent of the flamingo. And thus the heron takes the stage as a flamingo assimilated into the (spotless) petit bourgeois interior – albeit with an increased level of kitsch. In *Reiherbild I*, 1968 [Heron Painting I: see p. 108], there is a diagonal trellis in the background which is readily recognisable as the decorative rose trellis. The birds' slender necks are set against the glowing red of the sunset. In *Reiherbild III*, 1968 [see p. 107], the pale disc of the sun is added to the scene. *Reiherbild IV*, 1968 [see p. 111], is dramatically heightened with the evening glow turning into sheet lightning against the night sky, although the sky in the lower half of the picture transforms downwards into some kind of a living room decor. And ultimately there is a furious finale in the shape of *Sonnenuntergang mit Reihern*, 1969 [Sunset with Herons: see p. 110], which brings together all the various allusions in what can only be seen as a farewell to the petit bourgeois world, with the fake leopard skin somehow epitomising this ironic closing hymn.

However, *Reiherbild II*, 1968 [see p. 109], seems to be an interloper here: the consciously dilettante use of paint straight from the tube sits uneasily with the other 'mood pictures.' On the contrary, this work reads much more like a malevolent riposte to the kind of painting perpetrated by those such as George Mathieu who renounced any hint of pentimenti in order not to impair that first rush of artistic inspiration. All this begs the question as to why it is that these pictures do not in fact descend into pure kitsch? Nos I to IV of the series all use beaver cloth as the picture

carrier, a material that is still used today for sheets. If one takes into account the fact that both the motif and the haptic properties of the fabric constitute the picture itself, the result is a thematically discordant configuration of 'pair of herons – sunset – sheet.' In addition to this, the unrefined use of colour runs directly counter to the kind of illusionism necessary for 'genuine' kitsch. For the latter presupposes a viewer who still unquestioningly values technical skill. Polke falls short of any such yard-stick at every turn. However hard one may try, in the face of Polke's works it is impossible to feel the "sentimental self-indulgence" and "microcosmic cosiness"[26] that are central to the appreciation of kitsch.

The same may be said of another work from this period, the *Negerplastik*, 1968 [Negro Sculpture: see p. 113]. And it must be said that the patterned fabric support that itself becomes part of the picture could hardly be surpassed in terms of kitsch: an importunate mixture of hares smoking cigarettes, bear cubs playing with yo-yos, fawns bedecked with bells and collars, a fox and a cock keeping cosy company – all motifs from an unrelenting nursery idyll. The scene is, however, seriously disturbed by paint smears and a superimposed, block-like, painted sculpture apparently supported by a pair of scissors.

These examples show Polke's bravura stand against the forced eclectic harmonisation of kitsch. In his work the elements of kitsch are not homogenised: on the contrary, they are 'heterogenised.' And in the process any hankering for the small-scale and the cosy is ironically cast aside. Instead Polke takes the viewer from out of the restrictive realms of 'home-maker mode' into the all-pervasive realms of the grotesque.

### *The Aestheticisation and Disavowal of the Trivial*

It is now time to turn from works addressing the socio-aesthetic context of the German living room to works looking at the wider world.

An early example is the *Doppelporträt Fabiola*, 1965 [Double Portrait of Fabiola: illus. 21]: a typical image from the tabloids of the time, which still take delight in the pleasures and the pains of the upper classes. The blank spaces for a caption made it evident that the picture is based on a printed original. This immediately turns the motif into a pictorial quote. Polke created a double image, using a realistic photographic representation much as Gerhard Richter and James Rosenquist were doing at the time. For the second image he painted a consciously dilettante, free copy. The immaculate features of the regal beauty become positively vulgar: the painting deconstructs the photograph.

In *Liebespaar II*, 1965 [Lovers II: see p. 17], Polke became even more brutish. Again the work is evidently based on a photographic original. The posture of the hands would seem to imply an advertisement for washing-up liquid or hand cream. The figures are portrayed in a style veering between verism and comedy – the way the elegant gentleman's suit is cut off below is only part of this, for while the left side

26 Giesz 1971, pp. 28f., p. 73

of the work is a misshapen abstract painting, round, coloured splodges dance across the woman's face and décolleté.

In both works Polke used reproductions that anyone could have access to. The way that he handled them points up with the utmost clarity the difference between these and comparable Pop Art works. Looking back, Arthur C. Danto put it as follows: "Warhol recognised that nothing an artist could do was going to reveal anything more of what art was searching for than reality already was doing. Therefore what mattered was to show things as they were: without shadow, perspective, chiaroscuro, facture or colour."[27] This is certainly an exaggeration as far as means of representation are concerned, and yet it does go to the heart of Warhol's method, which is most evident in his use of series. As early as 1962, the Ferrus Gallery exhibition which included his 32 images of tins of Campbell's soup showed, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh put it, that Warhol was destroying the status of the picture as "an individual artistic item by putting the same image – and price – on all his pictures, virtually turning them into products."[28] In Polke's case, on the other hand, the picture always retains its status as an individual entity – and this applies equally to his screen dot pictures as will be seen later. In addition to this, the examples here show that Polke responded consciously to each different original before working out his treatment of it. And the treatments that he decides upon are almost invariably subversive, running counter to the theme of the original.

Whereas in Pop Art the higher reaches of art are trivialised while the trivial is aestheticised,[29] in Polke's work the trivial is both aestheticised and disavowed at one and the same time. This disavowal – and that includes herons and palms – is the outcome of ironic distance. Even one of the few works where commercial items are thematised is patently different to Pop Art, as in the picture *Kekse*, 1964 [Biscuits: see p. 12]. Although this work comes close to Pop Art the subject matter itself is so comparatively low key that it has little to do with advertising images. The biscuits are simply floating aimlessly around in the picture space. As in the picture *Plastikwannen*, 1964 [Plastic Tubs: see p. 20] the 'empty' picture ground is used to neutralise, from the outset, any hints of advertising that might be incorporated into the whole. In this sense, rather than pointing to the saturated consumerism of the sixties, the motif has much more to do with the still gaping gaps in the basics of everyday life in Germany in the fifties.[30]

The same applies to the *Wurstesser*, 1963 [The Sausage Eater: see p. 23]. The theme is taken directly from fairgrounds and the decorations on the sausage stands.[31] A string of sausages turns into an ornamental shape which can be read in two ways: either a runner waving some sausages or kind of squid. Having once discovered these figures the viewer's perception slides between them and the plain string of sausages – as though between the picture space and the picture surface: a process of constant self-renewal. The sausage eater himself seems rather like an accessory to his own hallucination. The shift between an ornamental string of

27 Danto 1992
28 Buchloh 1989, p. 52
29 See Hofmann 1978, pp. 501f.
30 Wildt 1994
31 As related by Polke in conversation with the author on August 13, 1987

sausages and a monstrous figure is a typical characteristic of grotesque ornament: "Ornament mode and picture mode are the reality. Inseparable and mutually invigorating, balancing and floating, they create a kind of irony, which is ultimately a game with the possibilities of art, in fact with art itself."[32] And this is the same sense in which Polke's *Wurstesser* goes beyond the reality of the fast-food stand and enters into the realm of the grotesque, where fantasy roams free, detached from any serious reality.

This mixture of grotesque and comic provides another sighting of that same anarchic attitude already evident in Polke's 'anti-thematic,' subversive interventions in the field of German domestic life and which will continue to be an issue throughout this discussion of his work. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin: "The moment of laughter, the carnivalesque world view that is at the basis of the grotesque, destroys narrow-minded seriousness as well as any claims for the timeless significance and immutability of notions of necessity."[33] In its grotesque heightening of an everyday object the *Wurstesser* introduces the spirit of Fluxus into painting more than any other of Polke's works from the sixties. The celebration of the trivial, with Fluxus taking up where Dada left off, seems all the more radical in the *Wurstesser* in that the work itself takes the form of a traditional easel painting.

7 *Rasterzeichnung (Lee Harvey Oswald)*, 1963. Private collection

### 3. Rasters and Dots

In *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Richard Rorty brings out the difference between those engaged in metaphysics and those engaged in irony. In agreement with Sartre he describes the position of the ironist as "meta-stable." This complements and to a certain extent confirms Bakhtin's "carnivalesque world view." In Rorty's words, ironists are "never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves."[34]

Nothing describes this awareness more aptly than Polke's handling of his raster or Benday dot pictures. The raster, as used by Polke, corresponds from the outset to the notion of contingency, because it is structurally metamorphic. The reality which emerges from the raster is in itself fragile, in a constant state of transition, constantly dissolving and reforming as a contingent, vibrant configuration of dots.

How does this metamorphic structure come into being? Let us examine the *Rasterzeichnung (Lee Harvey Oswald)*, 1963 [Raster Drawing (Lee Harvey Oswald), illus. 7], where it is possible to see how the raster was made. The paper was first covered with the finest of even, horizontal lines. Then dots were stamped freehand along these. This was done using the rubber on the end of a pencil. The number of dots was determined by the original. Today Polke uses a slide projector for this process, but in the early days he used a magnifying glass to count the number of dots.[35] After that the dots were linked together so that gradually the motif emerged. The rather rudimentary nature of the process in this work throws all the more light on the circumstances of Polke's raster pictures.

32 Bauer 1962, p. 21
33 Bakhtin 1969, p. 28
34 Rorty 1989, pp. 73f.
35 See Hofmeister 1995, p. 65

*Degrees of Pictorial Reality*

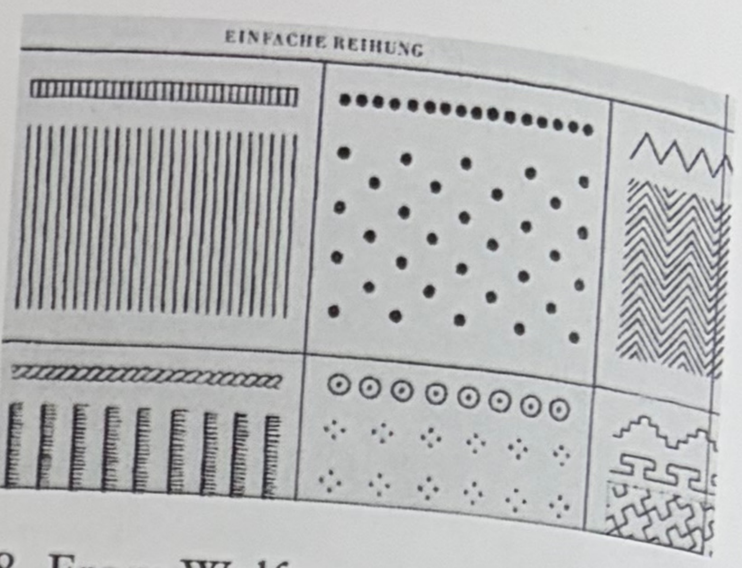
Firstly, it is clear that any illustrative function the raster may have is in fact secondary to its role as a non-representational ornament. Wolfgang von Wersin includes it as such, exemplifying the use of simple rows, in his morphology of ornament (illus. 8). As a repeat pattern it easily stands up as a 'genuine' form of ornament. This very interplay gives rise to the picture *Vase II, 1965* [see p. 29], where a three-dotted beaver cloth is both ground and motif.

This basis in ornament then makes it possible for individual dots to subsequently break free from their ordinates and even to play around just wherever they like.

Secondly, the arrangement of dots represents the mechanical grid of the printed image. In black and white printing the raster is used for halftone printing with relatively soft transitions between the lighter and the darker tones. The raster block that is produced in the photographic process breaks the tone values into individual, printable elements: tiny dots, which by their density determine the form of the motif and which merge in the eye of the beholder into a coherent picture. In the case of newspapers, a coarse grid size is used to accommodate the consistency of the newsprint itself and in fact most of the motifs assimilated by Polke in his pictures are taken from newspapers.

But when these are magnified perception shifts. Under normal circumstances the viewer's perception is concentrated on the subject matter: "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see. In short, the referent adheres."[36] However, the dominance of the referent which withstands the photographic printing process yields under the transformation effected by the raster picture to the dominance of its own mode of representation, namely the raster itself. This now takes over the position of referent: in itself now first and foremost motif, wholly at one with what it is representing.

Thirdly, it is evident that in *Rasterzeichnung (Lee Harvey Oswald)* within the grid itself there are certain irregularities. Not simply that the dots peter out at the right hand edge of the picture or that they are distorted in the lower portion of the face: above all the patch with a line leading round to the nape of the neck obstinately refuses to give way to the process of transformation; for it is clearly not representational as such. Thus, as the secret link between printed photographic original and reproductive representation is dissolved, so too, and to the same degree, the productive modality of painting looms into sight. For, as Benedetto Varchi declared during the Paragone debates in 16th century Florence, painting makes such things "appear, as are not."[37] Thus in this image two modalities intersect with each other, reproductive as in the printed photograph and productive as in the act of painting. Thus pictorial reality becomes a theme in its own right. Printed images in newspapers prey heavily on the status of photography, which derives from photography's apparent objectivity and which in turn leads to its ubiquitous use in reportage, in photo-finishes, as evidence in the law courts and




8 From Wolfgang von Wersin, *Das elementare Ornament und seine Gesetzlichkeit.* Ravensburg, 1940

36 Barthes 1984, p. 6
37 Quoted in Bätschmann 1984, p. 87

9 *Freundinnen*, 1966.
Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart

10 Cover, *Frankfurter Illustrierte*, May 16, 1959

as a scientific tool. It is only very recently that this status has been weakened by the development of digital photography whereby even amateur photographers can already 'create' pictures just however they want. Yet news journals and advertising continue to survive because photography, like no other medium "satisfies [society's] demand for realism and legibility."[38] Roland Barthes saw the essence of photography in its confirmation of reality, in its "that's how it was." And in this a decisive part is played by contingency and chance, which elude the conscious process of choice and control inherent in photography. Barthes called this the "punctum" of photography.[39] In fact, Benjamin had already pre-empted Barthes' main point: "No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject [...]."[40]

### *Shimmering Images*

How then do Polke's raster pictures interpret photographic reality as printed in newspapers and journals? Much of the answer may be found in his multi-coloured raster pictures, such as *Freundinnen*, 1965/66 [Girlfriends: illus. 9]. The original is by no means an image of friendship: it is obviously promoting the latest in swimwear, as may be seen from an issue of the *Frankfurter Illustrierte* from 1959 (illus. 10) – the fashions are different but the pose is strikingly similar. As in *Doppelporträt Fabiola* the 'empty' areas below the image and to the right show that this is a pictorial quotation. Using a perforated metal 'stencil' and a spray-gun Polke applied several monochrome grids on top of and next to each other, creating a pictorial effect that seems to vibrate, and holds its own as such against the actual subject matter from the very first moment of viewing.

Technical colour reproduction also uses different rasters for each individual colour. In order to create a coherent printed image, faithful to the original colour, the angling of the individual rasters is crucial if unwanted moiré effects are to be avoided. The very effect that printers are at pains to avoid, is extensively exploited by Polke. Most of the picture surface shows moiré effects. The oscillations that these set up in the viewer's eye are the consequence of none of the grids having been positioned 'correctly.' When these coloured grids extend beyond the hand-painted motifs – particularly when viewed neither too closely nor from too far away – then the whole visual effect is unfocused and chromatic. It is as though the entire image were coming away from the picture carrier and moving in constantly changing, non-locatable zones. At the same time, both subject matter and picture surface are flooded by a strange kind of translucency.

Georges Seurat was of course the first to exploit this effect in his chromo-luminarism, where from the middle distance "the entire surface pulsates with colour and a shimmering atmospheric veil seems to hover over the picture."[41] Seurat's

38 Bourdieu 1990
39 Barthes 1984, p. 27
40 Benjamin 1979, p. 243
41 Homer 1964, p. 173

colour system is intended to reproduce the luminosity of coloured light by using particular combinations of coloured pigments and is based on the complex interplay of local colour with all its nuances, white mixes and complementary colours.[42]

In Polke's case, however, each colour is restricted to one tone only; and in any case there are not the same kind of simultaneous contrasts as in Seurat's work because the coloured grid is generally interspersed with the white of the picture ground. Nevertheless, here too the visual impression is determined by exactly those 'incomplete' colour mixes that occur albeit in a different form in Seurat's works. And again, as in Seurat's work, the overall effect changes radically according to the viewing distance.

If viewers try to focus on the picture for more than a certain length of time, they find their eyes no longer able to adapt to the image. Thus the perception of these works is entering an area that also concerns Op Art – and this applies equally to the non-coloured raster pictures. However, while Op Art simply provokes the eye as a visual organ, in Polke's work the eye is always treated as a sense organ. The shimmering effect that greets the viewer in Polke's raster pictures never obscures the fact that the raster is primarily a mediating structure and by no means purely visual.

### *Decomposition and Recomposition*

Raster pictures open up a whole range of associations that are not confined to printing techniques alone but which relate in much broader terms to technical pictures *per se*. Polke saw this early on: "And I like the way that the dots in a magnified picture swim and move about. The way that motifs change from recognisable to unrecognisable, the undecided, ambiguous nature of the situation, the way it remains open. [...] Lots of dots vibrating, resonating, blurring, re-emerging, thoughts of radio signals, radio pictures and television come to mind."[43]

Nothing is so effective as raster pictures when it comes to destroying the naive acceptance of technical pictures as depicting "things from the world on a flat surface" that is to say, as a representation of "the world itself."[44] For raster pictures present the world of images as a world that is both dissolving and in need of reconstruction on the part of the viewer.

They reveal, in the terminology of Vilém Flusser, the "mechanical programme" used to create technical images, above all in photography. This "programme" is "discourse recoded as symbolic facts": theories translated into facts which serve to "magically programme society's behaviour in the interest of the machine."[45] The last stage of this coding takes place via the transmitters "which impregnate photography with the meaning that will determine its reception."[46]

In the fifties Günther Anders was already judging the technical media in this light: "What can be said of the news is even more relevant when it comes to the pro-

11 *Berliner (Bäckerblume)*, 1965. Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe – Garnatz Collection

erblickte. Omen für Reise! Man äugling mit ufzuwiegen. Sümmchen n jüngsten ? Auf den 300 DM, zigpfennig- en zusam- es Gewicht. von dem g durch die nd in der urden nicht älle gemel- uf den Mee- uglinge mit ufgewogen Die jeweili- onnten die

„Bitte", sagte sie, „gib mir mal dein Taschentuch! — Ich kann es ja nachher mitnehmen und dir auswaschen." Sie brachte den Satz nicht deutlich zu Ende.

Er strich mit der Hand über ihr Haar.

„Das kannst du doch", sagte er, „dann — hier tun."

**Bäckerblume**

BÄCKERKURIER

DIE GROSSE KUNDENZEITUNG DES BÄCKERHANDWERKS

Erscheinungsweise wöchentlich

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12 Imprint for the trade journal *Bäckerblume*, circa 1963

42 See ibid., pp. 133ff.
43 Hülsmanns 1966
44 Flusser 1983, pp. 30f.
45 Ibid., p. 32/34
46 Ibid., p. 38, see also Buchloh 1976, p. 142

grammes themselves, namely that it makes us unfree, because we are only shown things from elsewhere in an already established, prepared, pre-decided ready-made version: there is no place for our own judgement and this all the more so in the sense that we are unable to resist simply accepting, as reality, the judgements placed before us."[47]

Polke's raster pictures, on the other hand, work at the deconstruction of this prepared, pre-decided world view. It seems in many ways that Polke dissects the smooth outer surface of these images into their constituent parts simply in order to rebuild them in a new confrontational, subversive form. Thus there is a dialectical process of decomposition and modified recomposition. These opposed forces then result in pictures that are anything but smooth, where once solid surfaces dissolve into porosity.

13 *BZ am Mittag*, 1965.
Städtisches Museum Abteiberg
Mönchengladbach

14 Original used for *BZ am Mittag*

### *Phantasmagoria*

In *Tisch*, 1963, [Table, see p. 30], made using a metal stencil, the subject matter stands out clearly from the dot pattern. This work is not based on any particular original. This in itself leads to various inconsistencies, for example, on the one hand the grid of dots functions as 'shadow' whereas when it comes to the vase on the table it seems to be defining different areas of the image – once again emphasising the creative role of painting.

In the case of *Berliner*, 1965 [Doughnuts: illus. 11], the image of the baker is undoubtedly taken from the journal *Bäckerblume* (illus. 12). With the exception of the neck this is a faithful transcription, dot by dot. On the other hand the outlines of the baker's jacket are free invention, that is, created using a dot pattern which is itself a fabrication. Polke takes this process a stage further in the singular work *BZ am Mittag*, 1965 (illus. 13). In this case the original is already a simulacrum, namely a 'newspaper' printed in very limited numbers for a wedding, purveying a mixture of gossip and facts about the bridal couple (illus. 14).[48] Gently tongue-in-cheek, all the various items became equally credible because they were 'in the paper.' The wedding was in 1911. In 1965 Polke was commissioned to re-do the title page of the paper for the widow's 75th birthday. Although Polke was by now already using a spray gun, on this occasion he resorted to the earlier method and, albeit with the metal stencil, created the image dot by dot with a round rubber stamp.

The result is highly ornamental. However, it is particularly notable that Polke has developed the whole picture from a raster for which there was never an original. In addition, he covers the whole picture surface while the actual cover picture was much more limited in its scope. Thus this raster is not imitating a newspaper raster; it is much more of a shorthand indication of the notion 'newspaper.' Applied to the motif in question, it ultimately becomes a vehicle for imaginative memory. The full extent of the reach of this method may be seen in the picture *Großer Kopf*, 1966 [Large Head: see p. 35], for what may be read here as a 'head' is in fact no more

47 Anders 1956/1985, p. 163
48 With grateful thanks to Frau Koch of Wuppertal for generously supplying a photocopy of the wedding paper.

than the multiple superimposition of differently coloured dot patterns in various sizes. Thus the formation of the image is purely phantasmagoric without reference to any printed original.

This ambivalence, showing 'what is not there' and yet using the processes of reproduction comes up again in *Pasadena*, 1968 [see p. 97], which has a caption implying a photographic original. In fact here Polke employs the powers of decomposition of his raster technique to create a shimmering image that consists exclusively of dots, patches and blanks. As it passes through the raster the landing site for the space probe becomes a landing site for the viewer's errant imagination.

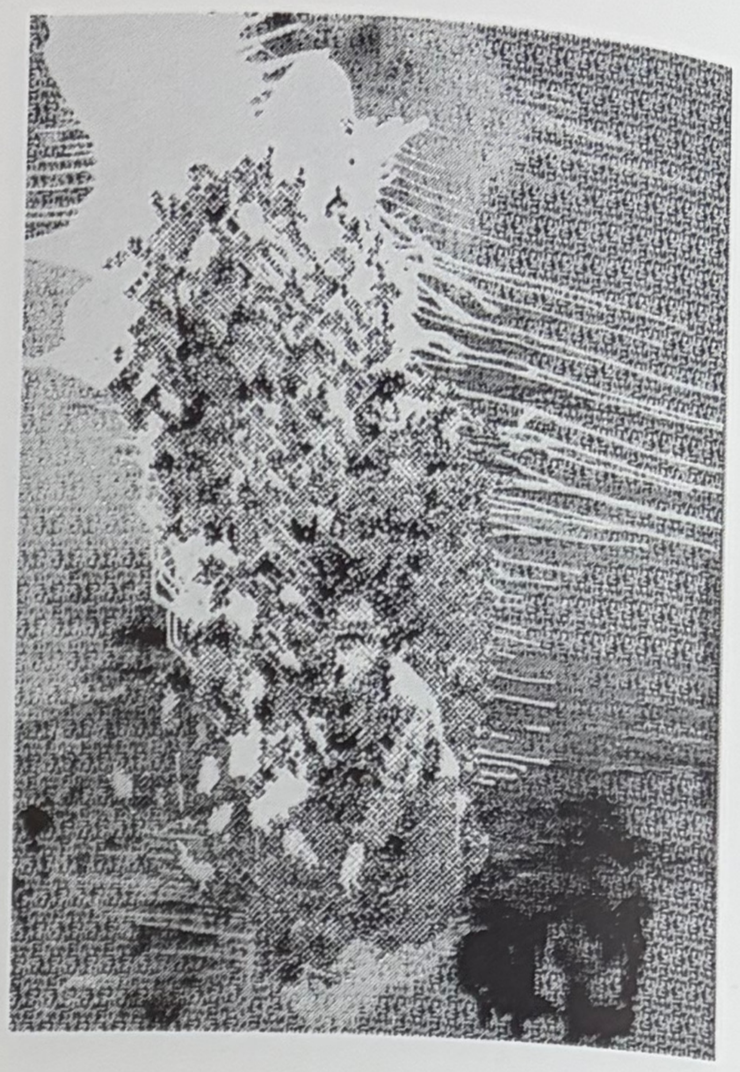
These examples show how Polke's rasters are in a constant state of transition. In Reinhold Hohl's words: "not that a pictorial configuration 'is' this or that, but that it 'could be' something, or even something else."[49] It is like a free-floating, metamorphic game, engendered by the phantasmagoric quality of the raster dots, which in turn derives from their underlying ornamental character.

This is particularly so in the series *Kartoffelköppe* [Potato Heads], from which *Kartoffelköppe (Mao & LBJ)* 1965 [see p. 33] is on show here. Here the raster on the right side of the picture already seems like a parody of a real printed raster where representation is dependent on the homogeneity of the dot pattern. This system is vehemently contradicted here: each dot has a distinct and arbitrary colour and thus negates the functioning of the system. Towards the left of the picture the individual dots even begin to swell up, causing the sitter (Mao or Lyndon B. Johnson?) considerable problems and in this process, where the dots seem to be taking on an existence of their own, parody becomes self-parody. We have before us a process of poietic disillusion, where the imaginary becomes its own subject matter – a practice found elsewhere in the realms of Romantic irony and in keeping with Schlegel's requirement for poetry that it should "describe itself too in all its descriptions, and everywhere be both poetry and poetry of poetry."[50]

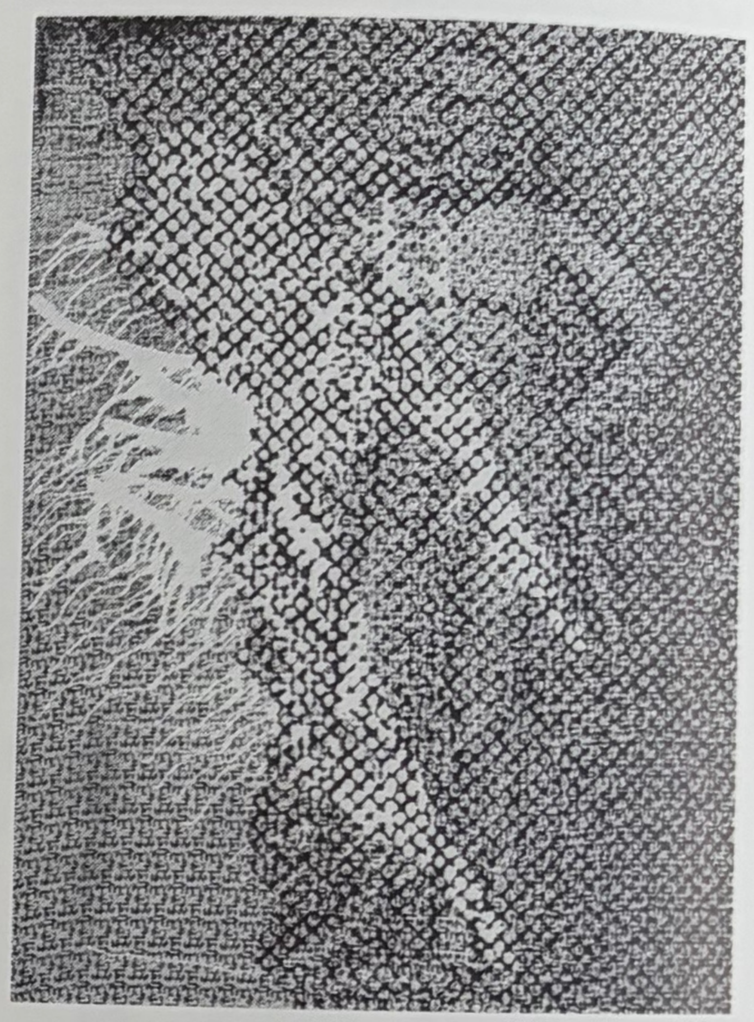
The significance of this is that works like the *Kartoffelköppe* created the conditions that have allowed the raster to become a multifarious means of representation and to function within consistently new and unexpected contexts, as it still does today.

*Chance and the Raster Continuum*

In *Alice im Wunderland*, 1971 [Alice in Wonderland: see p. 227], we again find a fabric with a dot pattern: in this case it partly becomes the patterning on the mushroom. Painted in a form of iron ore, this work has distinctly magical qualities as does *Die Schere*, 1982 [The Scissors: see p. 229]. Rasters can even 'become' wire mesh as in *Amerikanisch-Mexikanische Grenze*, 1984 [American-Mexican Border: see p. 252], where a *Kleiner Mann* [Small Man] or a *Großer Mann* [Large Man], both 1986/92 (illus. 15, 16), may hide. On occasion the raster tells of the realms of fantasy (*Die Schuhe des Yeti*, 1994 – The Shoes of the Yeti)[51] or points to the interface



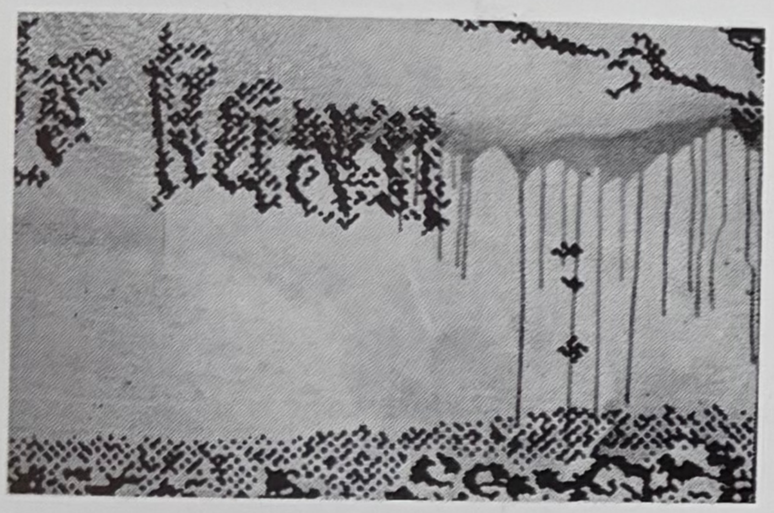
15 *Kleiner Mann*, 1986/92.
Collection of Frieder Burda



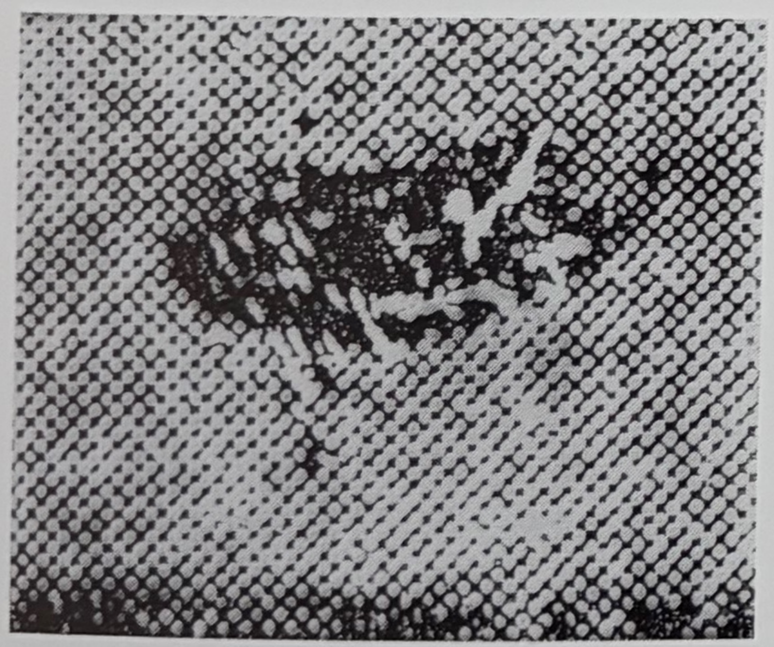
16 *Großer Mann*, 1986/92.
Collection of Frieder Burda

49 Hohl 1982, p. 74
50 Schlegel 1958ff. (2), p. 204 (Athenäumsfragment no. 238)

17 *Entartete Kunst*, 1983.
Kunstmuseum Bonn, permanent loan from the Collection of Hans Grothe



18 Detail from *Entartete Kunst*



19 *Druckfehler*, 1996.
Private collection

of aesthetics and history as in *Entartete Kunst*, 1983 [Degenerate Art], where a swastika emerges by chance from out of the pattern of dots (illus. 17/18).

This form of hallucinating seeing has more than a little to do with what the Surrealists called objective chance. In fact when Polke examined the reprint in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of the crowd outside the notorious exhibition of 'degenerate art' he did indeed discover a configuration of dots that finds its way into his own work as a swastika. André Breton defined the 'hasard objectiv' as the "meeting of outer causality and inner finality,"[52] and many of his followers, including Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí, paid their own tribute to the fascination of taking the chance occurrences of the material world as magical dispositions.

Polke has recently completed his series *Druckfehler*, 1996 [Printing Errors: illus. 19] which is devoted entirely to mutations in raster grids. Printing errors of this sort are familiar from newspapers and seem unavoidable despite advanced printing processes. Usually one ignores them. Not so Polke: he isolates these configurations and magnifies them until it is impossible to relate them to the original image. What was an error in the 'mesh' of the printed raster is re-composed by Polke and becomes a meta-visual world.[53] And in this sense the pictorial reality of the newspaper raster reveals itself as resistant to any codification. As to the size of this visual world: the works themselves do not let on whether it is cosmic and huge or microscopically small. But one thing is certain: that in the world of technical images, which we take as illustrations of reality, nothing is fixed and where we expect consistency we find

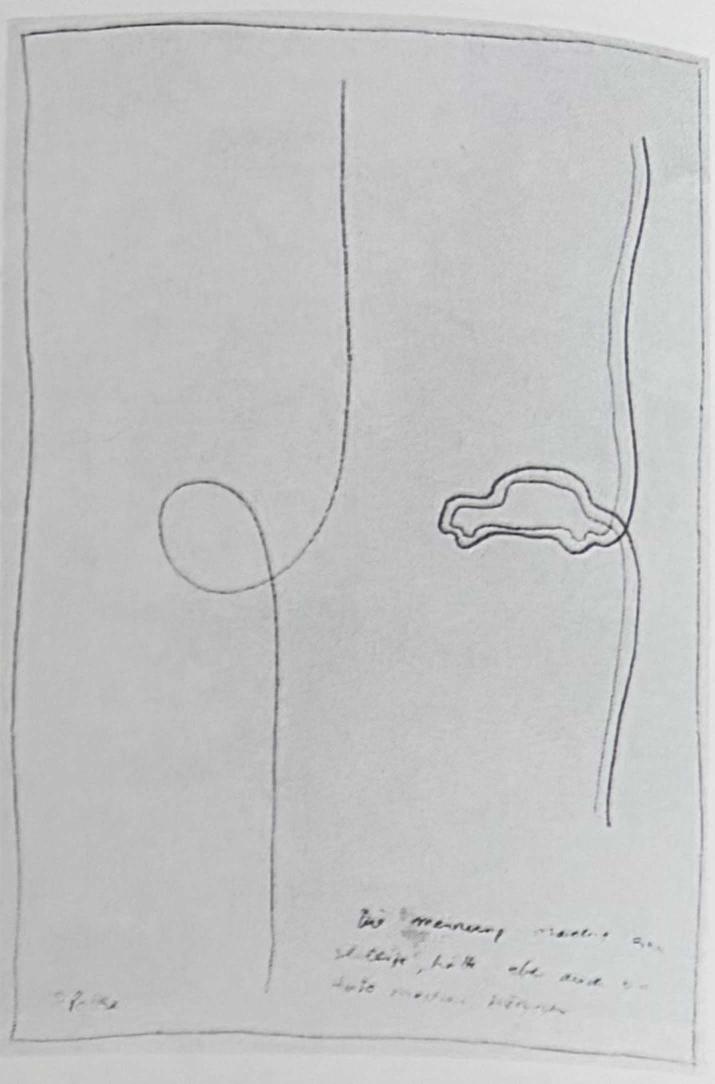
51 Illus. in: exh. cat. Polke, Valencia 1995, p. 86
52 Breton 1937, p. 23
53 See Berswordt-Wallrabe 1996

contingency. The reality to which these images refer is always temporary. It is not simply there; rather it is transitory and even then only exists by virtue of the power of the imagination. One world – the familiar world of the sayable – gives rise to many worlds and these bring with them the unfamiliar and the unsayable.

### 4. The Metamorphoses of the Imagination

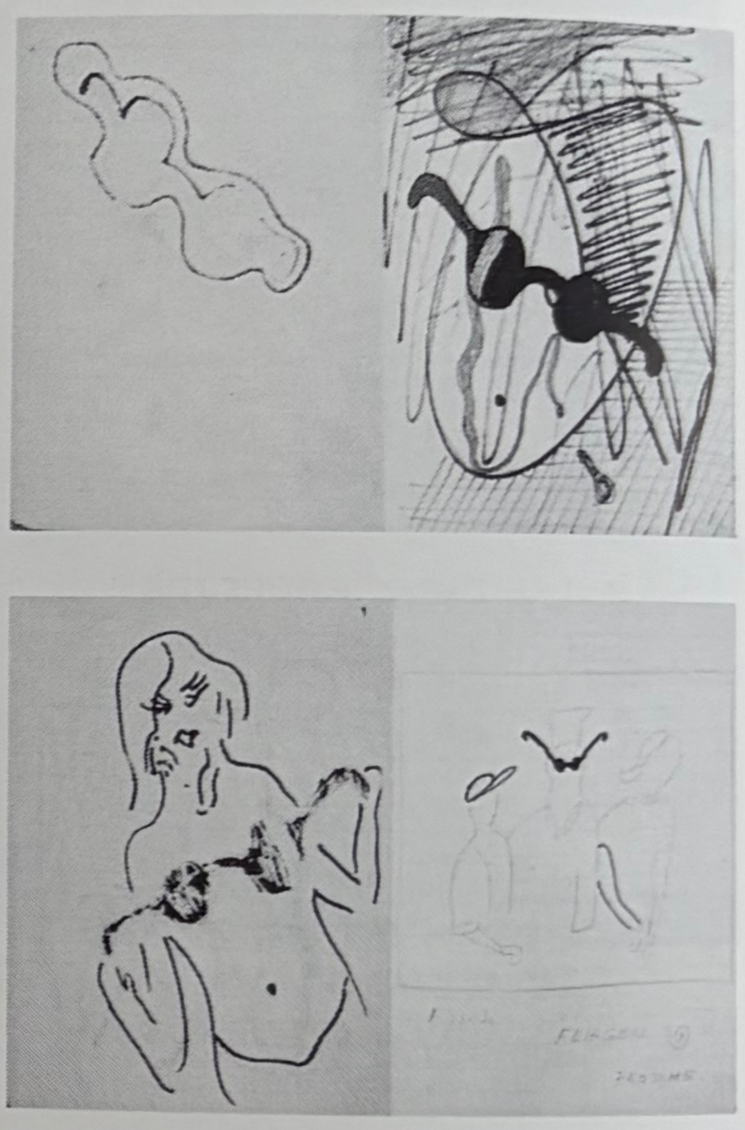
*Existence and Relativity*

Take a drawing from 1968 (illus. 20): on the left side Polke draws a line with a loop in it; on the right side the loop becomes the outline of a car and, as though to reinforce this, the line is doubled. The title on the paper reads: "Opinion makes a loop, could just as easily have made a car."



20 *Die Meinung macht eine Schleife…*, 1968. Private collection

Now take another two drawings from the *Schulheft, blau (Tagebuch)*, circa 1970 [School Exercise Book, Blue (Dairy): illus. 21, 22]. On the right hand page there is a large, oval form that emerges from a free-flowing complex of lines, shading and meshes. A pair of dark glasses, seemingly stamped over it turns the image into a head. The glasses show through on the back of the same page but here the superimposed line drawing of a young woman turns them into a bra.



21/22 Two drawings from *Schulheft, blau (Tagebuch)*, circa 1970

In this context the drawing *Umwandlung*, 1968 [Transformation], which Polke and Gerhard Richter worked on together is also of relevance.[54] It is an ironic depiction of the power of artistic imagination to transform a whole mountain range into a ball shape.

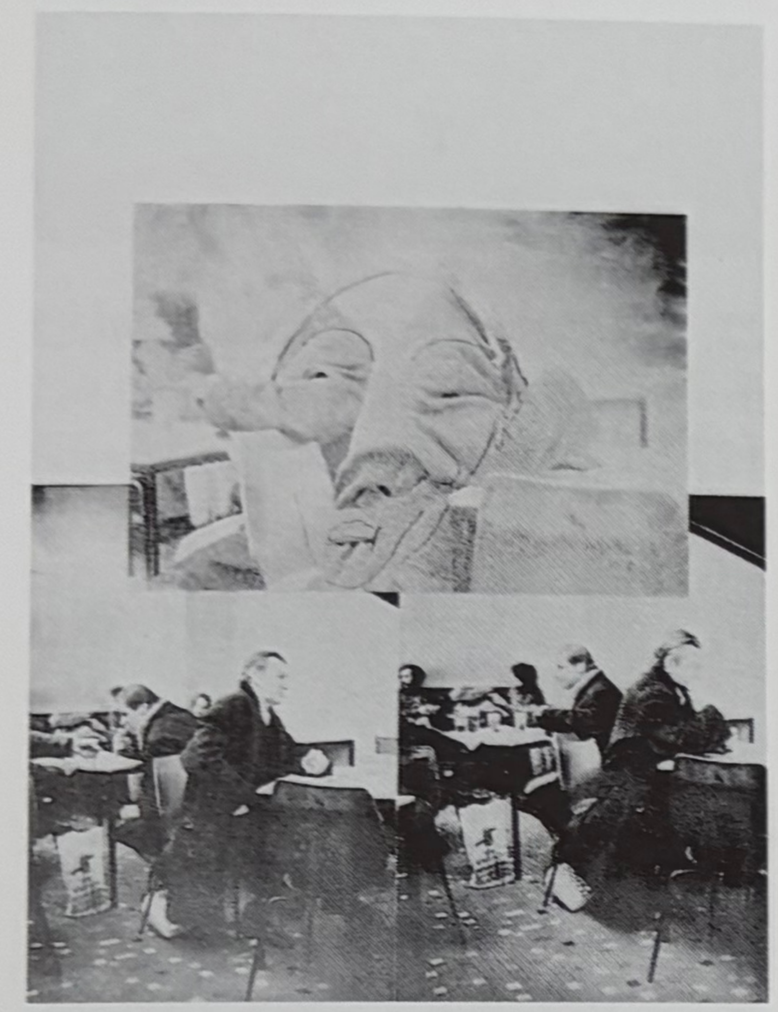
Less spectacular, yet hardly less effective, are the transformations perpetrated by ordinary people to give vent to their dissatisfaction with images of their leaders. Spurred on by the national elections of 1972 Sigmar Polke took a whole series of defaced election posters and published them with the title *Bizarre* (illus. 23). The artist's own eye is of course somewhat subtler, as may be seen in an over-drawn photograph from 1976/77 (illus. 24), where Polke has discovered a grotesque face in the coats of two customers sitting in a station bar. He creates a third figure from the fall of the cloth: a figure that is by definition transitory and owes its only existence to the conditions of that particular moment.

These are but a few examples amongst many. They are in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's assessment of the role of the carnival-grotesque, which is "to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate form from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and extablished truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."[55]

In terms of our intellectual history this attitude which has its roots in popular culture was absorbed by Nietzsche into his philosophy and subsequently revived by Dada. In Nietzsche's own words: "The world that concerns us is false, that is to say,

54 Illus. in: Block 1971, p. 146
55 Bakhtin 1965, p. 34

23 From *Bundestagswahl 1972 – Bizzarre*, Edition Staeck, Heidelberg, 1969



24 Over-drawn photographs from exh. cat. Polke/Duchow, Kasseler Kunstverein, 1997

not a fact, but a rounded extrapolation of a meagre collection of observations; it is 'fluid,' in the making, a constantly shifting falsehood that never approaches the truth: for – there is no truth."[56] The Dadaist Tristan Tzara takes up the same theme: "[...] everything is relative. What are beauty, truth, art, goodness, freedom? Words, that mean different things to different people."[57] Similarly, André Breton, the theoretician of Surrealism, is driven by the desire "to proceed beyond the insufficient, the absurd distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, true and false, good and evil [...]."[58]

In the 70s this thought was to take flight once more – first of all in the context of the theory of science: "The truth is what the mode of thought says is the truth"[59] as Paul Feyerabend put it, whose 'Anything goes' became the clarion call of Dadaism and anarchic epistemology, eventually leading to the theory of Postmodernism: "A Postmodern artist or writer is in the same position as a philosopher: the text that he is writing, the work that he is creating has no basic existing principles to follow [...]. Thus artists and writers are working without rules, they are working in order to construct the rules of *what will have been made*."[60] In his list of aspects of the Postmodern Ihab Hassan includes amongst other things: "Irony, perspectivism, reflexivity: these concepts express the human spirit's ever necessary creativity in the search for a truth which always recedes before one and allows the individual no more than ironic access to itself [...]."[61]

How this ironic access to the truth might appear in aesthetic terms is well illustrated by a drawing from Polke's *Skizzenbuch, rot-orange*, 1972/73 [Sketchbook, red-orange: illus. 25], which has recently given rise to an easel painting (1992, illus. 26) called *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind* [Seeing Things As They Are]. The title, cut out of a newspaper and stuck on to the picture is illustrated by several, hesitantly drawn rectangles: their outlines intersect, ironically casting doubt on their validity. The call to see things 'as they are' is therefore wholly misleading. For each angle relativises the other, thwarting the healthily plain language of picture's textual premis.

And the same thing happens to language in *Das war schon immer so – Das haben wir noch nie so gemacht – Da könnte ja jeder kommen* 1982 [It's always been like that – That's not how we did it before – Anyone could say that: see p. 209ff.]. For these lacquer panels completely contradict everyday experience and the concomitant metaphysical formulation that "there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances."[62]

### *Scientific 'Gravitas,' Magic and Irony*

Polke early on broke with any such notion. His *Wiederbelebungsversuch an Bambusstangen*, 1968 [Attempted Resuscitation of Bamboo Poles: see p. 150], bears witness to the imagination's stubborn yet witty resistance to this principle of underlying reality, in this sense taking up Salvador Dalí's 'paranoid critical method': "paranoia

56 Nietzsche 1966, vol. 3, p. 497
57 Tristan Tzara, Lecture at the Dada Congress on 23 and 25 September 1922 in Weimar and Jena; repr. in: Tzara 1976, pp. 5–13; p. 8
58 Breton 1969, p. 125
59 Feyerabend 1982, p. 48
60 Jean-François Lyotard, in answer to the question 'What is Postmodern?' in: Welsch 1988, pp. 193–203; p. 202, italics as found
61 Ihab Hassan, 'Postmoderne heute', in: ibid., pp. 47–56; p. 52
62 Rorty 1989, p. 74

uses the outside world and its materials to concretise its own crazy notions. But it uses it in such a bafflingly individual way that it does not convey the reality of this mad system even to other paranoid people nor impose it on them." As far as Breton is concerned this method proves "the omnipotence of the desiring and wishing that are all Surrealism has ever believed in."[63] Polke's installation is set up like a biological 'experiment': next to the bowl with the bamboo poles there is a second bowl with square rods, to act as a 'control group,' the usual method used to establish the scientific validity of an experiment. But at the same time, all the rules of science are in fact invalidated by the very way the experiment is set up. Instead, magic comes into play, that "immediate dominance of the spirit over the material" which, according to August Wilhelm Schlegel, could lead to "wonderful, incomprehensible effects."[64]

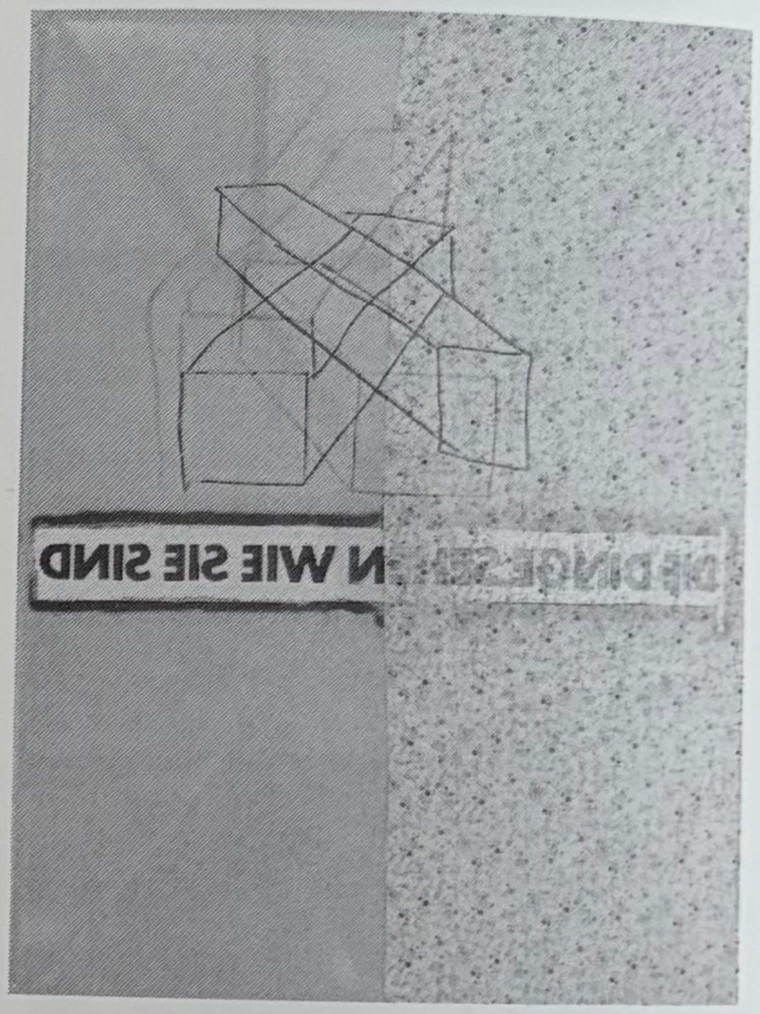
No less imbued with magic powers is the *Kartoffelhaus*, 1967 [Potato House: see p. 148], a kind of modified arbour, 'potato chest' and 'orgon box'[65] in one. The construction of spars with a potato impaled at each intersection (preferred variety: 'Ackersegen' – 'field blessing') alludes to the somewhat fantastic notion that the growing powers of the nightshade family could permeate the trellis like an electric net and transfer mysteriously to each person that enters the construction. What science views as abstruse has always been peculiarly fascinating to Polke. This piece shows the first signs of the importance that alchemy is to assume in his later works, relying as it does on the "omnipotence of the desiring and the wishing" that is an intrinsic part of an artistic imagination of Polke's sort.

On the other hand, it is impossible not to notice the ironic elements both of *Wiederbelebung...* and of *Kartoffelhaus*. For, however much scientific order may be rendered magical by the imagination, nevertheless magic does not in reality come to pass: the bamboo does not sprout and one leaves the potato house unscathed, exactly as one had entered it. From out of the possible realities presented in these works there emerges a "ironic parascience"[66] which gives aesthetic expression to what is null and void as far as scientific logic is concerned. Thus magic and irony are dialectically linked.

They could be viewed as modes of the comic. In the words of Odo Marquard: "The things which are funny and provoke laughter bring to light the trivial aspects of what is officially valid and the valid aspects of what is officially trivial."[67] Thoughts of Duchamp's 'science amusante'[68] as described by Herbert Molderings come to mind. The latter sees in Duchamp's first ready-made, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, a "combined pseudo-scientific construction and object for meditation"[69]: a formulation which could be applied only too well to these works by Polke.

Duchamp's ironic parascience manifests itself most clearly in his *Trois Stoppages – Étalon* [Three Threads for Invisible Mending – Standard Length], also from 1913. He took three threads, each a metre long and dropped them on to a flat surface. From the resulting chance shapes he formed three measuring sticks which he

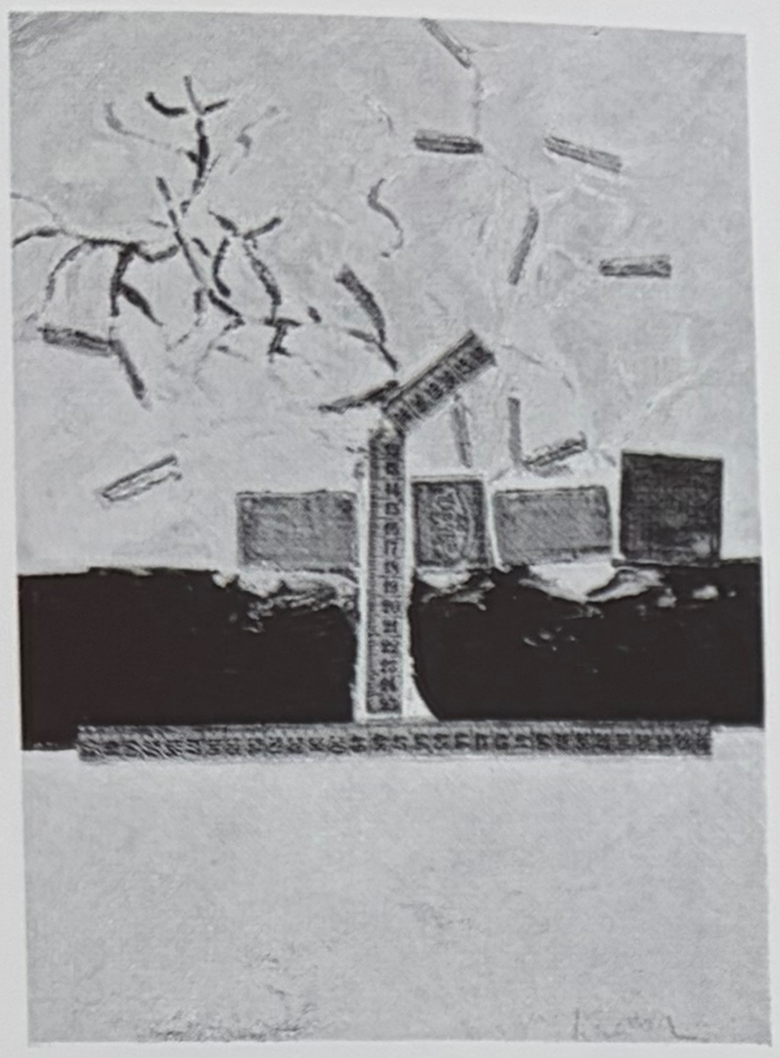
25 *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind*, from *Skizzenbuch, rot-orange*, 1972/73. Private collection



26 *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind*, 1992. Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe – Garnatz Collection

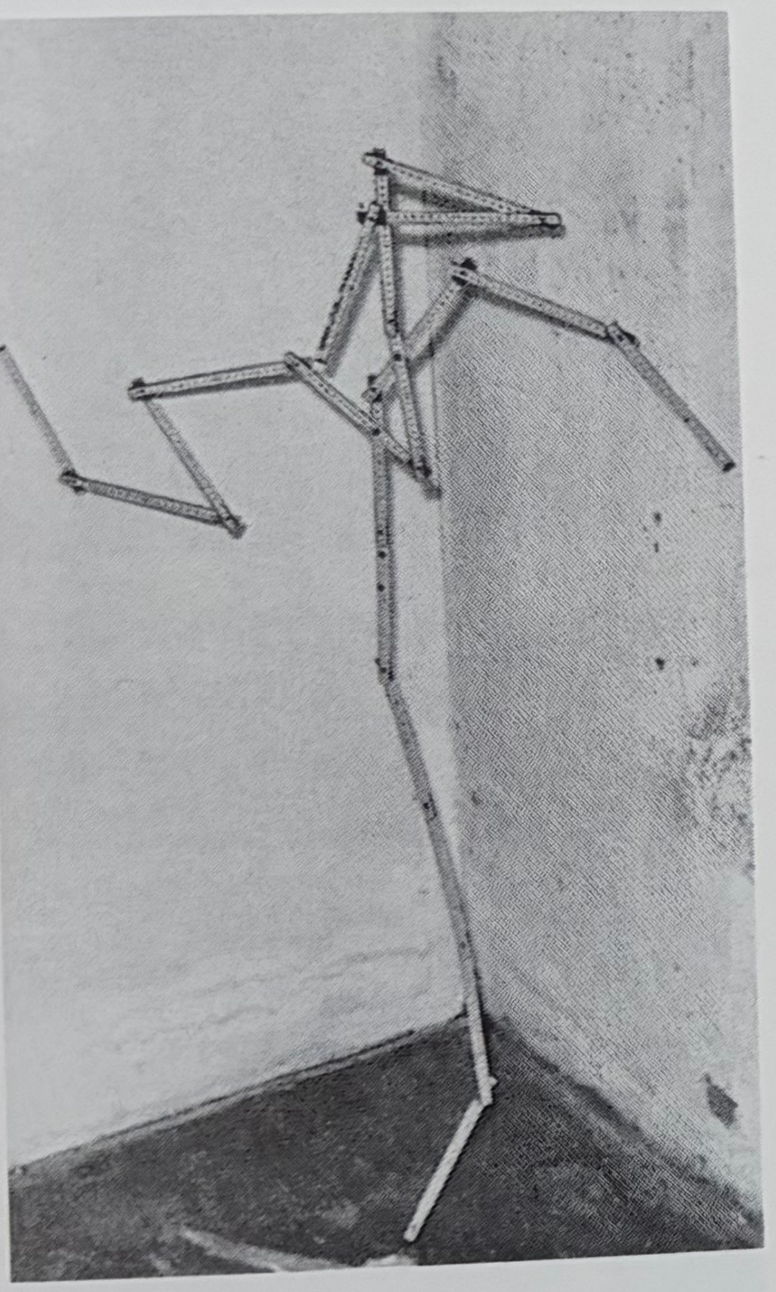
63 André Breton, quoted in Nadeau 1965, p. 168, p. 169
64 Quoted in Kapitza 1968, p. 63
65 In the terminology of Friedrich W. Heubach (text included in this publication)
66 Molderings 1983, p. 37
67 Marquard 1976, p. 141
68 A term used by the French journal *La Nature* for scientific phantasies.
69 Molderings 1983, p. 41

arranged in a box, rather like the 'platinum-standard metre' that is kept in the International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Sèvres. Thus whimsy and chance are granted the status of world-wide standards. And elsewhere too, official measuring units become the battleground for an offensive against scientific rationality: as, for example, in Raoul Hausmann's object *Geist unserer Zeit*, 1919 [Spirit of our Times] – mounted on a monstrously altered head – or transformed into a tree trunk in Francis Picabia's collage *Les Centimètres*, 1918 – 1920 (illus. 27).



27 Francis Picabia, *Les Centimètres*, 1918–20. Schwarz Collection, Milan

Polke makes subversive use of a measuring-stick in his *Zollstockpalme*, 1966 [Inch Rule Palm: illus. 28], which is then taken up in the folio *...Höhere Wesen befehlen*, 1968 [Higher Beings Command] along with further 'possible palm forms.' All the items contained in the folio share the pseudo-scientific gravitas of the written explanations, as does the folio itself which bears a significant resemblance to large sheets of card, with charts or facts, once used in schools as a whole-class teaching aid. Thus gravitas finds that the levity of triviality has caught up with it once and for all.



28 *Zollstockpalme*, 1966. Private collection

Meanwhile Polke's parascience continues to fruit, as in the drawing, *Erweiterung des Planetensystems um einen 10. Planeten*, 1968 [Enlargement of the Planetary System by a 10th Planet: illus. 29], where the new planet is, of course, called Polke; or as in *Sternenhimmel-Tuch* 1969 [Starry Heavens Cloth: see p. 165] where Polke uses an astronomical card as the intellectual framework for the mythological notion of an 'extraordinary heavenly occurrence.' The paradigm of this notion is the Star of Bethlehem that appeared at the time of the birth of Jesus. Polke built on this coincidence by giving 24.6 (without the year) as the date of the appearance of 'his' planet, hinting at the concept of 'completed circles.'[70] Each year, the viewer is informed, this sight will return to the night sky, showing that this artist is no ordinary mortal.

Yet at the same time – and here a pattern is beginning to emerge – the artist deflates his own 'elevation,' by using cardboard circles and strips of sticky tape for the stars. The potential variability that thereby surfaces in the constellation deconstructs the configuration of astronomy, astrology and tales about the artist. Whatever the starry heavens say to us: it could all be completely different.

Therefore it is hardly surprising that Polke homes in on motifs that in themselves are concerned with the 'transformability of things.' *Alice im Wunderland*, 1971 [see p. 227], comes into this category. Lewis Carroll's story is based on the contradictory logic of the 'wonderful,' itself subject to constant transformation. Polke goes back to the illustration by John Tenniel which focuses paradigmatically on the very essence of the narrative: we see the caterpillar – itself a metamorphic creature – smoking a hookah, sitting on a mushroom, which Polke's dots turn into a fly agaric. "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter," says the caterpillar to Alice who has shrunk to such an extent that she can only just see over the edge of the mushroom. In addition to this, the football players, complementing

70 See Blumenberg 1979, pp. 76ff.

the dot patterns, also change their size until they transform into the chimeric giant on the right hand side of the picture.

The theme is yet further developed in *Tischerücken*, 1981 [Table Turning: see p. 217], where there are no clearly defined forms, simply a multivalent paint mass, representing 'ectoplasm,' supposedly substantial matter that may appear through a medium in a spiritualist meeting. Polke combines this eruptive form with a sober diagram of telekinesis and thus demonstrates again the deconstructive power of his images. For what is apparently paraded as proof of the parapsychological phenomenon, itself proves to be a phantasm. The fabric ground plays no little part in this, creating a third level to the picture and invoking the bourgeois domestic interiors where séances of this sort might take place.

Whenever Polke enters the realms of magic – as in *Magnetische Landschaft*, 1982 [Magnetic Landscape: see p. 228], or in *Die Schere*, 1982 [The Scissors: see p. 229] – irony follows close on his heels. Thus his forays into parapsychology should not be misunderstood as reinforcing his criticism of scientific rationality. His interest in the magical is always the ironic interest of a person who has cast off the strictures of the western world and is now using his new-found freedom to see about those things that did not fit into the prevalent notion of progress. Reservations about everything also lead to an interest in everything. And everything could always be completely different.

29 *Erweiterung des Planetensystems um einen 10. Planeten*, 1968. Private collection

### *Laterna Magica: Lucidity – Transparency – Projection*

This latter point is clearly demonstrated by the various versions of the *Laterna Magica* [see p. 319 ff.], which Polke first showed during his series of exhibitions in the United States between 1990 and 1992.[71] The whole wash of western culture – fairy tales, magic, history and the present – seems to be gathered into this work. What matters particularly is the way that these areas are brought together: they all go back to the notion of metamorphosis. While the raster and fabric pictures are already consistently metamorphic, this quality is vastly increased in the *Laterna Magica*. This stems from the fact that all the individual elements are united by 'transparency.'

Polke produced his first transparent works in 1987,[72] that is to say, soon after he had created his wall-paintings for the XLII Biennale in Venice in 1986, using hydrosensitive paints that changed colour according to humidity levels. The transparent works then transport these changing colours into imaginary space. Proximity and distance, visibility and illusion constantly shift, caught up in the play of opacity and lucidity as the paint thickens and thins. And this interplay is yet further increased by fact that the *Laterna Magica* is in fact a screen made up of many different pictures, each with its own perspective.

The 'laterna magica' was one of the earliest devices for projecting images.[73] They were first used and distributed for the purposes of religious instruction by Jesuit scientists exploiting the mystery of how the pictures were created in order to fool their

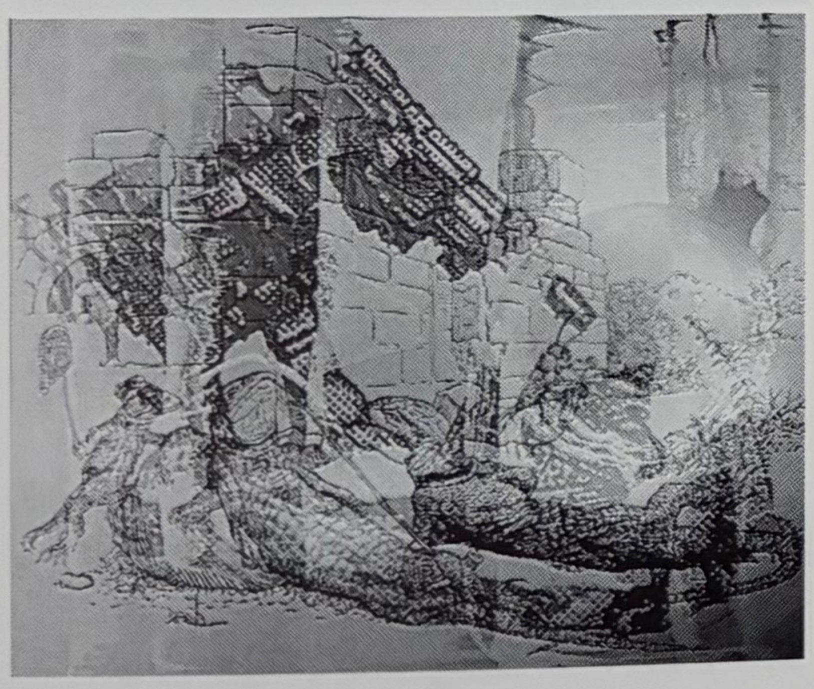
71 See Flood 1995 and Hentschel 1995

72 See exh. cat., Polke, New York 1989

73 See Hoffmann and Junker 1982

30 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

31 Detail from *Münchner Bilderbogen Nr. 77–80, Kartenspielereien Nr. 1*, circa 1852



32 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

innocent audiences into thinking they were in the presence of magical forces that would show them the writing on the wall. Only as the technological secrets were gradually revealed did these visits to the realms of the numinous become purely entertaining, generally taking place at fairgrounds. As well as the phantasmagoria that were included in every performance, the laterna magica would also tell of distant parts and adventurous expeditions, of different events – some relatively likely, some wholly unlikely, some positively grotesque. The fascination lay in the fact that by superimposing images all sorts of things could be simulated: daytime and night-time, the seasons, motion, fire – illusions that eventually led to modern day cinema.

By painting his transparents on both sides, Polke takes up the original practice of projecting multiple images. But while the aim in the early days of the laterna magica was to heighten the illusion and for the viewer to lose themselves in the images, Polke combines images that seem both heterogeneous and incompatible. Thus in his montages, the apparently disparate unite and 'illusory' experience is replaced by 'imaginary' experience. Viewers will see what is there differently and, in the process, each will become aware of him or herself according to whatever they are focusing on. And even the act of focusing is always, by definition, transitory, insofar as the images that emerge are always accompanied and even cut across by other sensations. In this sense, the picture breaks free from its carrier, creating its own 'optical level' which is, however, not fixed but instead prone to waver in an indeterminate manner. As the viewer enters into Polke's *Laterna Magica* the magical, flickering lights of the original projections come on of their own accord in the viewer's inner perception.

Representational motifs, paint masses and trails of colour, fabric designs and painting run the gamut of visibility, with the range extending from pictorial narrative to close to a point where the descriptive powers of language start to fail. The variety of sources that Polke draws on is scarcely credible: playing cards, comics, cartoons, artistic drawings, alchemical illustrations, fairy tales: nothing seems to escape his encyclopaedic interest. And all the time he consistently returns to motifs that are intrinsically metamorphic, as for example to a card from the card games published in 1852 by the *Münchner Bilderbogen* (illus. 30, 31) where the hearts are grotesquely embellished with human figures. He is equally taken by a drawing by Grandville (1803–1847), (illus. 32), where two lizards are resting in front of an old wall – one wearing a jacket and a neckerchief and smoking a pipe while the other, turned casually towards him, is wearing a frock coat. The other side of the transparent is dominated by 'transformers,' half-machine and half-animal or human being, favourite children's toys with the intriguing capacity to change from one thing into another. Taken together, which the lucidity of the transparent makes possible, a new reading emerges where the humanisation of the animal world answers the 'animalised' beings of the machine world.

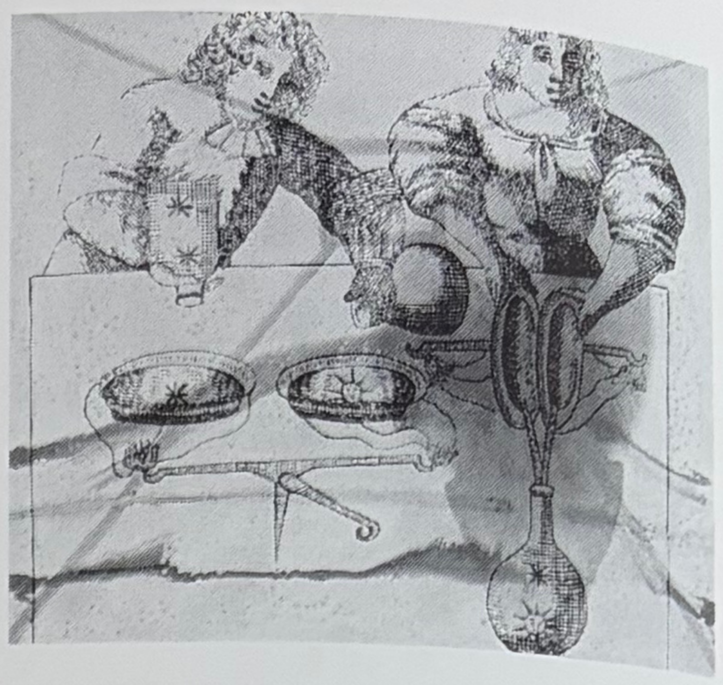
In two of the transparents there are depictions of the 'chymic marriage' of disparate substances – in alchemic terms, the union of mercury, quicksilver and salt

(illus. 33, 34, 35).[74] Polke interweaves these pictorial quotations with pools of lacquer on both sides, where the allegorical allusion apparently becomes fact. And even the Red Lion (the code name for the philosopher's stone), the final product of the alchemical process of 'conjunctio,' is depicted in one picture [see p. 332], hidden in a design of acanthus tendrils, coupled with red lacquer.

*Solve et coagula* [dissolve and unite]: this basic principle of alchemy could equally well stand as a motto above the different versions of the *Laterna Magica*; for its constituent parts are in a constant process of transformation, both as they are perceived and in their connotations. To come back to Novalis: "At this time he found everywhere objects already known to him but marvellously mingled and mated, and strange vicissitudes often arose within him. Soon he became aware of the inter-relation of all things, of conjunctions, of coincidences. Ere long he saw nothing singly."[75]

In fact Polke's *Laterna Magica* can be read as a shorthand account of the world, but with its own perspective, different to customary modes of perception. The discovery of perspective with a fixed central viewpoint during the Renaissance naturally tempted artists into notions of superiority and dominance, taking the 'seen' as dependent on and coming from the seer. Modern science, on the other hand, is largely founded on the concept of space as homogenous and isotropic, quite the opposite to the idea of the self-centred observer. The perspective-based importance attributed to location paved the way for the division of the world into individual scientific disciplines, which in turn laid the foundations for notions of dominance and power.

And now the double perspective of the *Laterna Magica* subjects all that is seen to literal 'revision.' All those certainties that rely on a fixed location are instantly confronted with their own opposites. This goes to the heart of alchemical metaphor that is part of this work, for alchemy itself is based on the principle of polarity. But where everything is "doubled,"[76] suddenly we find ourselves in that carnivalesque world which resists all notions of order and dominance, revealing the deeper meaning of the multiple perspectives that Polke develops in his translucent images.



33 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

34 Page from "Altus" (pseudonym), *Mutus Liber*, La Rochelle, 1677

35 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

### 5. On the Picture of the Artist and Art

*Profaned Inspiration: 'Vitrinenstück' [Showcase Piece]*

The realms of magic are where Polke goes to free himself from the enforced norms of scientific reason, only then to disavow the magical in order to ensure his access to the freedom of irony.

This dialectic – involving the norms of art as an institution – re-emerges in *Vitrinenstück*, 1966 [Showcase Piece: see p. 152], an installation in several parts.

"I STOOD BEFORE THE CANVAS, INTENDING TO PAINT A BUNCH OF FLOWERS. THEN FROM HIGHER BEINGS I RECEIVED THE COMMAND: NO BUNCH OF FLOWERS! PAINT FLAMINGOS! AT FIRST I INTENDED TO GO ON PAINTING AS BEFORE,

74 With grateful thanks at this point to Federica Gussoni of Stuttgart for kindly granting me access to *Mutus Liber* (La Rochelle 1677).
75 Novalis 1903, p. 93
76 See Gebelein 1991, p. 42

BUT THEN I REALISED THAT THEY MEANT BUSINESS." This is the artist's account of the picture which is the main protagonist in his installation, and as if by way of proof the picture of flamingos in the centre has a surtitle: THE PICTURE THAT WAS PAINTED AT THE COMMAND OF HIGHER BEINGS. In addition, there is a whole typewritten page giving details of how the picture came to be: the minutes of a visitation in which peas, saucers and further commands all have their part to play.

Consider the surtitle itself: it goes back to a topos with a long history, that of the divinely possessed artist, with the notion of inspiration as passed down from antiquity emphasising the irresistible moment of divine intervention. Schelling refers to this same phenomenon: "however purposeful he is, the artist still [...] seems to stand under the influence of a power that separates him from all other human beings and compels him to say or depict things which he himself does not completely understand and which are infinite in their meaning."[77] Surrealism was to turn this concept of a command from above into psychical automatism, by-passing conscious control.

It is not by chance that Polke focuses on the moment of compulsion. During his encounter with the Higher Beings unbelievable things happened: he was ordered to hold saucers up to his ears, to scrape away the sulphur tips on matches, to saw up one of his own pictures and perform other obscure acts – strange things to be happening in an artist's studio. Above all, the Higher Beings made their presence felt the next morning when the artist found the room filled with airborne peas, which he rightly recognised as dangerous flying objects. And it was of course peas that put a sudden stop to the wondrous activities of the Little People of Cologne in the well-known German folk-tale – so, here too, the peas point to the dangers of independent artistic productivity. But who would dare intervene so brutally in the creative process?

The showcase itself gives us a hint. As well as proof of the visitation, it contains a clue that is not mentioned in Polke's own notes, but which speaks all the more loudly for that: it is the Catalogue for *documenta I* which took place in 1955. It is open at a double spread showing Max Beckmann on the left and on the right the jury meeting for the Künstlerbund Exhibition in Cologne in 1952. Amongst others, the jury includes Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Ewald Mataré, Georg Meistermann, Emil Schumacher and Ernst Heckel: all artists who enjoyed high reputations in Germany in the 50s.

Polke adds a caption above the picture: "One day they, too, will see that it is better to paint at the command of Higher Beings." And now, in the light of this particular ingredient in the installation, the whole phantasmagoria of the encounter with Higher Beings takes an unexpectedly profane turn. For the Beings can suddenly be identified as the selection bodies that form an integral part of art as an institution. Like *documenta* itself, countless juries define the artistic landscape making decisions that decide the fate of artists' work. In the typescript it says: "they want to dissemi-

77 Schelling 1958, pp. 617f.

nate their culture, religion and language, I have felt their power" and the meaning of this sentence is only too mundane.

The ironic ambivalence inherent in the *Vitrinenstück* rests on the virtual identification of the 'Higher Beings' with the jury as a body of selectors, implying that it could be these very 'art judges' who have forced the flamingos on the artist, whilst preventing him from painting a bunch of flowers. And all the time, the flamingo picture is the last thing that would have found favour with this jury – pointing up the ambivalence and cutting wit of the reference to the notion of inspiration. For what traditionally comes from the dictates of 'Higher Beings' is in its very nature free from error: a notion that feeds the dogma, for example, that goes with claims that the Bible was divinely inspired. And it allows artists to withdraw, along with what they have created, into a realm where they are not subjected to judgement.

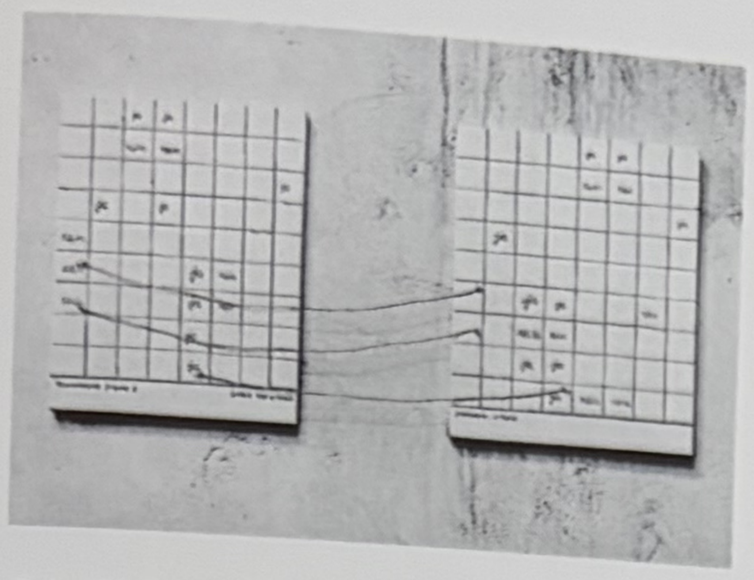
In that realm, for better or for worse, criticism will have no effect. But since the motifs 'flamingos' and 'bunch of flowers' occupy the same level of irony in Polke's eyes, this means that whole of the artist's work is free from any form of judgement.

Thus the inspiration theory takes a double dialectical turn. On the one hand, a whole collection of pieces of evidence are presented to prove the intervention of 'Higher Beings,' while on the other hand this intervention is reduced to the level of mundane tutelage on the part of those employed to judge art and finally – linking back again to the dictates of the Higher Beings – artistic activity now moves beyond the reach of any form of criticism. The crucial twists occur only insofar as each element in the installation is presented in the 'non-actual' mode which may be defined as 'irony.' But the *Vitrinenstück* may also be read as parody, in the sense that David Roberts understands the wider meaning of parody, that is to say, as an artistic modality that makes use both of the forms of production and the norms of reception determined by art as an institution.[78]

*A Sweep through the Topoi of the Image of the Artist*

Parody, as defined here, is also found in other works dealing with the topoi of the artist and artistic work. The previously mentioned folio *...Höhere Wesen befehlen*, 1968, for example, has a whole arsenal of these topoi. In *Fotokreis (Menschenkreis)* I, 1968 [Photo Circle (People Circle) I: see p. 149], Polke, quoting himself, refers directly back to the immediately preceding *Vitrinenstück*, for the centre of the work is taken up by a photograph (stuck to card) of the artist holding two saucers up to his ears. "And I could hear the saucers as they spoke to me," Polke notes in the *Vitrinenstück* in epiphanic terms. But the voice of the Godhead is now replaced by a babble of heterogeneous, profane voices. The circle of human figures round the artist is in fact largely taken by Polke from *Körperbau und Charakter* [Physical Build and Character] by Ernst Kretschmer, a highly dubious treatise on character types, going back to antique notions of temperament and based on empirical observation alone.

78 See Roberts 1987, pp. 175ff.



36 *Telepathische Sitzung I (Max Klinger – Sigmar Polke)*, 1968. Staatliche Museen Kassel, Neue Galerie, loan from private collection, Kassel

Initially the relationship of centre and periphery is certainly an allusion to the concept of genius: the god-like artist stands out from the circle of ordinary mortals whom he controls. However, the implications of inspiration reverse the values in this photograph, for the artist who favours ordinary human inspiration over divine inspiration, is certainly not able to create any works of genius.

Insofar as the human circle consists of heterogeneous and disparate characters that come together in the figure of the artist, the artist declares himself to be 'without character.' This is reasonable in the sense that, in terms of history, the typology of character has replaced notions of 'genius.'[79] Viewed in a positive light, the reliance on a whole variety of characters frees the artist from the tutelage of institutional art – however hard it tries in the time-honoured way to intervene in the artist's work. The process is similar to that in *Vitrinenstück*: The artist uses self-irony to question artistic topoi, in order to ensure his own freedom. In addition, this work also has a distinctly self-analytical aspect: the mismatch of the various temperaments clearly recalls those other carnivalesque mismatches that were so crucial to the works with heterogeneous fabrics and patterns.

Also in 1968, and as counterparts to *Menschenkreis*, Polke created two works inspired by two artists of repute: Max Klinger and William Blake (illus. 36). Both inhabit the kingdom of the dead, which gives conversation with them a somewhat occult touch, although it is in itself reminiscent of Nietzsche's description of the philosophers of ancient Greece: "[...] one giant calls out to another across the arid intervals of ages, and, undisturbed by a wanton, noisy race of dwarfs, creeping about beneath them, the sublime intercourse of spirit continues."[80] Where Nietzsche is employing metaphor, Polke sets up a quasi parapsychological experiment. In the 30s, the Professor of Psychology, Joseph B. Rhine and his colleague, Karl Edward Zener, carried out experiments using so-called Zener cards, in order to establish statistical proof of the existence of telepathy. The 'sender' or 'agent' – hidden from sight – turns over one card after the other and the 'receiver' or 'perceiver' tries to tell which card the sender has just turned over. In this light, the different pictorial fields look like quasi scientific reports. Thin lines show the number of telepathic 'hits.' What the dispute is, remains a mystery, as does the question as to how it is possible to record results from long-dead senders. Whatever the allusions to scientific reports, the system of pictorial fields and the arbitrary lines are without any real logic, other than the logic of humour.

However obviously Polke is using self-irony to both legitimise and deconstruct his position as an artist, there is method in his choice of these figures from the other side: Klinger is important to Polke for his combinatory skills clearly entering the realms of fantasy as in his series of engravings *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhs* [Paraphrase on Finding a Glove: 1878–1881], and which de Chirico also valued highly. And Blake is a truly kindred spirit. In Werner Hofmann's words: "As long as he lived, Blake opposed any institution that tried to exert its power over

79 See Weinrich 1976, col. 362f.
80 Nietzsche 1911, p. 79

people with the privileges of ownership."[81] And this ultimately applied to the 'art gurus' who wanted to force creativity to submit to rules and dogma: "Rules make the path straight" – in Blake's own words – "but crooked, unstraightened paths are the paths of genius."[82] Certainly Polke would have no hesitation in ascribing to this statement.

It is only logical, that in setting out to reassess the topoi that colour the image of the artist and atistic work, Polke should also focus on artworks and their diction, and this he does in a whole series of parodies.

*Parody and Assimilation*

The picture *Dürer-Hase*, 1968 [Dürer Hare: see p. 121], painted on patterned fabric, focuses on the 'exploitation' of an image for a never-ending series of calendars, brochures, towels, table cloths and so on. Polke demonstrates the resulting mix of art and the trivial that disturbs the art lover and the lover of 'kitsch' alike. In *Gummibandbild Dürer-Hase,* 1970 [Rubber Band Dürer Hare: see p. 169] parody reaches ridiculous heights allowing viewers to create their own 'Dürer Hare' whenever they want. The way art is received is also the focus of *Reh,* 1968 [Deer: see p. 116], which shows Franz Marc's well-known deer on a cheap youth hostel blanket. It is a tightly worked parody: by bedding the deer on a woolly blanket Polke wittily and pointedly gives his subject 'natural surroundings' of a sort, turning a distorting mirror as it were on Marc's nature mysticism.

The treatment meted out to his contemporaries is no different: Polke's ability to stand a theme on its head is impressively demonstrated in *Carl Andre in Delft*, 1968 [see p. 157]. It was in October 1967, when Konrad Lueg, using the surname Fischer, opened his gallery in the Neubrückstraße in Düsseldorf, that Polke had his first chance to see Andre's work for himself. The piece in question was *5x20 Altstadt Rectangle*, 1967 [5 x 20 Old Town Rectangle], an installation consisting of 100 square steel plates all of exactly the same size. At the time the work constitued a leading example of minimal art, for Andre had dared to break with traditional notions of sculpture in several different ways. A straightforward industrial product is used, which means that the artist has not worked the material. The body of the sculpture is no more than the technically predetermined thickness of the material used. Thus there is no room for illusion. It is a non-relational work, that is to say, it does not consist of a complex arrangement of disparate parts that become one immutable whole, but is instead simply a non-axial, balanced arrangement of identical elements. Thus the pattern could always be continued and its actual dimensions are only determined by the exhibition space, which it in turn defines. Lastly the sculpture may be walked on and as such – according to Andre himself – expresses its own history[83] at the same time as rejecting prevalent convention.

Although Polke's parodistic response *Carl Andre in Delft* has little to do with Andre's works, it does, however, focus brilliantly on the way that they must be read.

81 Werner Hofmann, 'Die Erfüllung der Zeit', in: Hofmann 1975, pp. 11 – 30; p. 14
82 Blake 1927, pl. 10
83 See exh. cat., Andre 1996, p. 42

Like Andre, Polke uses an existing product and intuitively recognises the potential inherent in what Andre is doing, although the latter does not arrive at the same point until 1969: namely the alternating pattern. But here the similarity ends. By introducing a white framework into the picture Polke transforms a non-relational structure into a relational structure: this is the only conceivable form for this particular image. The inscription makes it clear that the motif is a quotation, both witty and somewhat malevolent. As much as the Delft tiles – so utterly illusionistic – would repel the purist Andre, all the more does the kitschy pattern – illustrating an illustration – run counter to his innermost feelings. Yet at the same time the stretto of tiled pattern and steel plates does have a serious point: the topos of the non-personal. For Andre's works reject on principle any hint of the artist's own hand and the same may certainly be said of Delft tiles whether they are used to decorate a room or as a pattern on a towel.

By seemingly relating to Andre's approach, Polke extends the discrepancy between his phantasm and a real 'Andre' as far as it will go. For where the phantasm comes close to the original, it infects it with the virus of kitsch, the non-serious and the banal: forces that pull the rug out from under the feet of any attempt to create meaning and sense. In this work, sense is always disrupted with nonsense, real feeling is disrupted by laughter. But it is characteristic of Polke's comedy – unlike that of Andre – that what is expressed in this way does not become a mission statement. The moment the implied critical response is taken seriously, the laughter dies away. On the other hand, true irony returns to itself, leaving behind it the cause of the merriment – which accounts for its particular capacity for reconciliation.

This capacity for reconciliation comes to the fore in the *Streifenbilder*, 1967 – 1968 [Stripe Paintings: see pp. 118, 119]. Of course these works can be read as parodies of abstract painting, but the real nature of the relationship is not clearly defined and the actual points of reference uncertain. All that can be said for certain, is that these intentionally clumsy painting exercises are all carried out on a coloured ground which is seen by its frame to be a picture within a picture. And in this sense the viewer is prevented from seeing the brushstrokes as immediate gestures. In this context Benjamin H. D. Buchloh refers aptly to "theoretical-practical reflections on painting: not only on its motivation and its techniques, but also on the qualities of the results (expressive – meditative – constructive) and the historical models that preceded these, and on the way that these very historical and theoretical reflections themselves are incorporated into the act of painting."[84]

All these criteria come together in *Moderne Kunst*, 1968 [Modern Art: see p. 123], a work that has already acquired the status of an incunabulum, although it would appear to be almost wholly 'secondhand.' It is a dissonant collection of forms that occur individually elsewhere in Polke's drawings and paintings. And in the process all the categories that serve to accommodate the different modalities of abstract art are neutralised, as it were – exactly as happens with the umbrella term 'modern art.'

84 Buchloh 1976, p. 150

But the reverse also applies: given the title, *Moderne Kunst*, the various elements of the picture can be read differently as standing for the verbal shorthand that is widely bandied about: 'splotches' and 'squiggles' and 'streaks' that 'any child could do.' Seen in this light, the aspect of this picture that trips the viewer up is the fact that the words 'modern art' are used as though to guarantee the work's quality while they in fact do no more than gather up the props left over by the tabloid view of modern art.

This work is both complex and comprehensive in that it focuses on the modalities of artistic production and on the assimilation of art at one and the same time.

It does not seem right to characterise these works as parody in the narrower sense, because they are not based on specific originals. They function instead much more as a kind of ironic assimilation, that is characterised by a "wide interest in all sorts of forms and things."[85]

And in pursuit of this interest, these works create a stage for themselves against the backdrop of the most diverse of paradigms ranging from Dürer and Franz Marc to the practices of modern art. The different levels and forms of language that Polke develops in the process do nevertheless express a degree of reservation towards the accumulated traditions that he draws on. One could in fact describe these reservations as ironic. Polke's reservations towards tradition spark off his ironic games with those same traditions. This in turn throws light on Polke's own artistic polyglottism and heterogeneity. For where one's own subjectivity is only ever formulated with an eye to 'the other's' subjectivity and where that eye is reserved to say the least, then heterogeneity would appear to be the only suitable form for articulating that same subjectivity. This in itself is in keeping with the experience of Postmodernity. In his discussion of irony, Kierkegaard declares that "actuality has lost its validity."[86] Similarly Lyotard described Postmodernity as the "end of the meta-narratives,"[87] and this notion is then further developed by Richard Rorty in his rejection of the vocabulary of closure. To quote Kierkegaard again: "In irony, the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself – that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything."[88]

### 6. Worked by Chance – the Workings of Nature

As irony talks back to the real world, so it also finds other, possible worlds. Kierkegaard even goes so far as to say that the ironist "becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities..."[89] And, in this, chance plays into his hands: "The notion of chance implies that things could have been different, that the necessity that encompasses it, still leaves it an abundance of choices."[90] For Polke it is therefore simply logical to allow chance to play its part in the making of a picture.

He first does this by intervening in the chemical processes of photography. For a start, the series of 41 photographs, *Paris 1971*, (illus. 37) gives an impressive exam-

85 Japp 1983, p. 195
86 Quoted in ibid., p. 24
87 Quoted in Welsch 1988, p. 15
88 Kierkegaard 1989, p. 257
89 Ibid., p. 262
90 Köhler 1973, p. 14

37 Photograph from *Paris 1971*. Private collection

38 *Baumhütte*, 1976. Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

ple of an image being perforated and confronted with unpredictable chemical reactions – even to the extent of photographic 'decalcomania.'

"The aesthetics of fluidity"[91] where production is open-ended and influenced by chance, can also lead to ways of reading and interpreting representational art. In this sense, the chance form functions no differently to the dots in a raster picture or the pattern in a fabric picture as a "moule": an "elementary structure"[92] which is transformative and multivalent, according to context.

In the series of photographs *Bowery New York*, 1973, for example, (which Charles Haxthausen discusses elsewhere in this volume) Polke worked with very thin photographic paper which he put folded-up into the developing fluid because he had no larger developing trays. Thus the chemical process could only work up to a point. "I started off by making all the mistakes that you can make when you are developing and enlarging, but used these mistakes to interpret the images as I made them, because the dossers are lying in the dirt anyway."[93] The element of chance creeps like a chimera into representational images and thus produces connotations that could not have been evoked by one or the other in isolation.

The same applies to the painting on paper, *Baumhütte*, 1976 [Tree House: illus. 38], which consists of three bands of colour with a tree house, of the kind that the Koiari made in New Guinea in the early nineteenth century[94] rising up majestically in front of them. Again the image offers an interpretation of itself: this time in the irregular course of the paint – earth brown, sky blue and blood red – which gathers into large patches, solidifying and yet at the same time spraying aggressively apart. The colours tell of the paradisical harmony of humankind and Nature as it were, of the adventurousness of a life that we can only evoke as a dream and at the same time they tell of the destruction that homo faber has introduced to this form of life.

Even more than his work with photo-chemistry, it was Polke's journeys in 1980/81 to Asia and Australia that helped him to acquire a different awareness of the value of pictorial colour. While the colours in *Baumhütte* grew out of Polke's own imagined picture of that lost world, the three part work *Negativwerte I – III (Alkor, Mizar, Aldebaran)*, 1982 [Negative Values I – III (Alkor, Mizar, Aldebaran): see pp. 221–223], is based on the real experiences that Polke brought back with him from his travels. Not just that he now combined materials in mixtures that he had never tried before: red lead underpainting, violet pigment and oil paint: in addition he now also maltreated them to the extent that he consciously overstepped the limits of control. Thus chance was again incorporated into the works.

### *Changing Colours*

Anyone who has seen these pictures will know that no printed reproduction can begin to do justice to their colours. These not only change according to the angle of the light falling on them, but also according to the angle that they are viewed from. As far as colour goes, *Alkor* and *Mizar* are similar. If one approaches these from the

91 Bice Curiger, in: exh. cat. Polke, Cologne 1989, p. 8
92 Hofmann 1976, p. 14
93 *Parkett*, no. 26 (1990), p. 16
94 See Schmidt 1988, pp. 193ff. although I do not share his interpretation of the colours in this work.

side they at first seem deep violet or black, with an iridescent bronze shimmer playing across the surface. If they are viewed parallel to the picture the bronze shimmer does not entirely disappear but becomes an olive green tone, which itself has touches of yellow and black. The green, on the other hand, changes with the violet which at some points dominates the surface of the picture and at other points glows from within the depths of the picture. In *Alkor* the violet combines with red tones in the top third of the picture, whereas in the centre of the work, it partially breaks up; in *Mizar* it is mixed with white and becomes glaringly bright. In *Aldebaran*, violet dominates whatever the lighting or viewing point, it goes more into black than the other two, but does have the same greenish-bronze shimmer as the other two. *Aldebaran* is the only one of the three which allows occasional glimpses of the picture ground: because of the extremely fine, pigment-like layers that combine in varioius thicknesses, the white of the picture ground seems more like light than anything else.

The colours of all three pictures – the colour values and depths, their smooth transitions – are yet further heightened as soon as they are viewed in direct sunlight. The violet changes to dark blue, the olive green becomes a dark green and a mother of pearl sheen floods the picture, dematerialising it, as it were. Thoughts come to mind of the sudden, oscillating shine on medieval gold grounds when they are struck by daylight, or of the constantly changing colour that Heinz Roosen-Runge has observed in the 9th century *Book of Kells* from Ireland.[95] In fact the range of nuances that the violet (particularly in *Alkor*) displays has more than a little in common with the semi-transparent 'folium' that was frequently used in medieval book illustration, and which ranged from red-brown to purple and shades of blue.[96] Because of its range and its transparence – and particularly when it is used, as in the *Book of Kells*, in different glazes and mixed with other colours – the folium can change and even appear fluorescent, creating an overall impression of 'non-corporeality.'[97] Similar changes define *Negativwerte* as a visual experience. None of the colours stands alone, for they are all interwoven as a coloured mesh, from which individual tones emerge with varying authority, growing suddenly stronger or sinking back into the depths of the open picture space. Although it is possible to make out the materiality of the paint from close to, as soon as the pictures are viewed from a distance the colours become elusive, they seem to float and refuse to be pinned down to any particular spot.

The sense of something eluding one's grasp is increased by the fact that in all three works there are hints of figures, which nevertheless remain so vague that they even seem to flee one another. This game of something yet nothing is most highly developed in *Alkor*. The upper half of the picture would appear to contain the outline of an archer. Left of centre, shifting between red-violet and blue, there is a bowed head, and there seems to be another to its right outlined in green-violet. On the right side of the picture there are further traces of figures, but these defy descrip-

95 Roosen-Runge 1977, pp. 154ff.; Paul Groot mentions the *Book of Kells* in this context although without further explanation (Groot 1988, p. 68)

96 See Roosen-Runge 1973, col. 1472f.

97 An excerpt from Roosen-Runge's analysis of colour used in medieval book illustration may serve to illustrate the similarity of these phenomena. After his discussion of the *Gospel Book of Lindisfarne*, Roosen-Runge continues: "Quite fantastic and even more complex are the colours in the early 9th century *Book of Kells* now in Trinity College, Dublin [...] An important part of this is due to the folium although this is used differently here to elsewhere. [...] Minimal differences in the application of the folium means that the borders hover between blue and whitish purple-pink with the result that surfaces seem to merge into one another and the colour seems to be fluorescent, floating over the ground, not located on any particular surface." (Roosen-Runge 1977, p. 154)

tion. Possible figures are also present in *Mizar* (although to a lesser extent) and in *Aldebaran* (here to a greater extent). Thus the visual world of *Negativwerte* evokes that wave of hallucination that already fascinated Leonardo when he looked at patchy walls or clouds and mud.

Indeed *Negativwerte* raises the question as to how far we can trust our eyes: in the shifting colours, forms, surfaces and spatial effects, things emerge and recede to an equal degree. This explains the titles *Alkor* and *Mizar* for these are the names of two of the stars in the Plough, which are so close together that they look like a double star. Alkor, not as bright as Mizar, is sometimes called 'the eye test': individuals see it, according to their eyesight, either as part of a double star or as a single star. In fact, Mizar is itself a double star[98] and Alkor is a huge distance away from it. It is not hard to imagine that in the early days of astronomy before the existence of sophisticated optical instruments to confirm findings in the night sky, a phenomenon of this sort must have been a severe irritant – just like the colour phenomena found in Polke's work.

To return once more to the question of colour. Colour changes are the visual point of *Negativwerte*: the viewer witnesses a perpetuum mobile of colour, images glow and darken, spaces break up and surfaces reflect themselves. One might even say that the colour mutations in *Negativwerte* are mimetic, imitating nothing less than living Nature.

### *The Alchemy of Paint – the Extension of the Concept of Mimesis*

The idea that Nature – that is the Nature of natural objects – is inherently in motion, goes back to Aristotle.[99] He defines a natural object as something that contains within it the source of motion and rest,[100] known as 'natura naturans.' At the same time, however, the natural object is affected by motion from outside itself, thus Nature is "the moving moved."[101] Mimesis mediates between 'physis' (Nature) and 'techne' (Art) by, on the one hand, completing what Nature cannot complete and, on the other hand, by imitating what Nature has created. As Aristotle puts it: when a person builds a house they are doing exactly what Nature would do if it could build houses. Thus: 'active Nature' (natura naturans) is the paradigm of all poiesis. Poiesis is the imitation of (poietic) Nature."[102] This equation is only valid in that natural creation – like human creativity (poiesis) – is in fact teleological; that is to say, both follow an inner necessity which, once complete, will reach its own ultimate goal. But this leaves no room for chance.

It is only with the abandonment of the notion of Nature following some overall plan – as Darwin did so radically – that self-propelled motion and chance can be recognised within one and the same natural object. On this basis, it then becomes possible to construct an extended concept of mimesis, where chance and intentional processes can come together in the artwork under the general auspices of an extended imitation of Nature.

98 Double stars constitute one physical system, closely linked by mutual attraction.
99 For details on this see Knobloch 1981
100 Aristotle, Physics, Bl. 129b 13–14
101 Knobloch 1981, p. 21
102 Mittelstraß 1981, p. 44

And this is of central relevance to Polke's *Negativwerte*, as the artist himself has remarked: "It is about the chemical effect of the paint. That is why I included the didactic piece with the flat fish in the *Zeitgeist* catalogue. The flat fish changes its colour according to its surroundings, like a chameleon. We can't do that. We have to rely on the alchemy of the paint, [...] for example, the glow of my violet pictures that you can't just take home with you and yet which does affect the retina and which awakens in us a longing for the unknown mysterium."[103] Thus the alchemy of the paint sets in motion processes that are analogous to the colour processes we find in Nature: these alchemical processes are mimetic without being illustrative.

Changing colours have, of course, always been a telling sign of living Nature. Even today, leaving aside the animal world, the changing colours of the seasons still mean something. And it is no mere coincidence that names of colours are used to designate the various stages of alchemical transmutation. Different colours were taken as evidence of the stage that had been reached at any given point during the alchemical process (the Magnum Opus), which aimed to artificially hasten and complete the natural growth of Nature which was taken to be alive, and possibly even to have a soul.[104] The individual stages of this process of transmutation that was to take place in the alchemist's oven were named after the colours that matched the events concerned: 'blackening, whitening, yellowing and reddening.'[105] In particular the multi-coloured so-called 'peacock's tail' of the final phase of transmutation would be the visible evidence that here Nature was in the highest possible state of activity: for alchemical thinking saw life as "continuous transformation, that always takes places in the same substratum."[106] Titus Burckhardt, in his discussion of the alchemist's view of Nature, puts it as follows: "Nature has many faces. The most immediate of these was seen in the changes that a material could undergo, when it became liquid and then gaseous before re-solidifying, or when a crumbly material became waxy and smooth, when its form was dissolved and suddenly blossomed into crystals, whereby its colour might change. All this pointed to some basic material in the world, that can take on all forms and conditions without, itself, significantly changing and, at the same time, it pointed to the nature of the human soul which may display all kinds of conditions and qualities, all of which are part of its intrinsically ungraspable essence. Thus the alchemist's oven, or even his crucible, reflects in miniature the play of Nature – both physical and psychical – in all its immensity."[107]

In the imitation and completion of Nature the creator – "that is alchymia, bringing to its end, that which has not found its end"[108] – the concept of alchemy coincides with the traditional concept of mimesis. Both concepts presume that Nature is teleological. For Polke, on the other hand – and this point does bear emphasis – process-like colour changes do not occur according to some inner necessity but, depending on the intervention of the artist, are to a lesser or greater extent unpredictable. Thus any discussion of Polke's alchemy must leave behind it certain, substantial, traditionally alchemical notions. Polke's alchemy is better understood as a metaphor. In

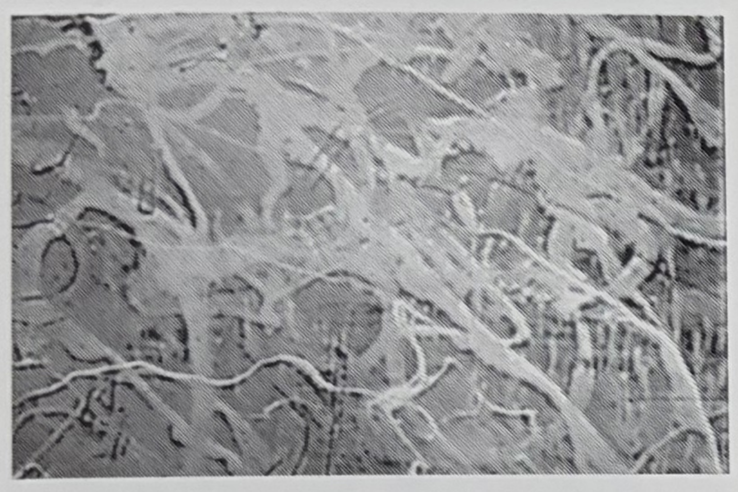
103 Quoted in Groot/Heynen 1983, pp. 281/285
104 Gaston Bachelard gives many instances of this view of Nature. May one example suffice here, namely a 17th century alchemist describing the nature of metal: "[...] extracted from the Earth, metal 'is now no longer nourished by it [the Earth], and bears comparison with old, worn out human beings [...] Nature retains the same cycle of birth and death in metals as in plants and animals'." (Bachelard 1978, pp. 234 – 235; see also Ganzenmüller 1938/1967, pp. 146 – 159)
105 See ibid., pp. 81/82 and Thiel 1980, p. 71
106 Ganzenmüller 1938/1967, p. 132
107 Burckhardt 1960, p. 103
108 Paracelsus, quoted in Ganzenmüller 1956, p. 335; see also Telle 1980, col. 330

this more constrained sense, where paint acts like a living, transformable material, the alchemy of the paint is at the same time the mimesis of living Nature.

This aspect of Polke's art was to be seen at its most impressive in the hydro-sensitive works in the German Pavilion in Venice in 1986 [see pp. 254, 255]: the appearance of these works was never fixed, and they derived their particular sensuality and meaning from the actual metamorphosis of the paint itself. In fact the colours of these wall-paintings reflected the atmospheric changes in the lagoon outside. For the substance that Polke used for these works was a solution of cobalt chloride that turns red in humid air and becomes bluish under drier conditions. As Dierk Stemmler puts it: "Nature intervenes [...] directly in the visual process."[109]

39 *Regenwetter (Regenbogen)*, 1982/83. Private collection

Nature also plays a part, albeit a different one, in Polke's 'Schüttbilder' [poured pictures] which he was already making at various times in the mid-70s; this is seen even more clearly in *Schnee und Hagel*, 1982/83 [Snow and Hail: see p. 213], and in *Regenwetter (Regenbogen)*, 1983 [Rainy Weather (Rainbow): illus. 39]. In these works lacquers were poured on to the canvases. These were then rotated with the result that the lacquers spread out at different speeds and in different directions to form and solidify into pools, rivulets and droplets. A similar process is also used in the group of seven gouaches *Ohne Titel (Schüttbilder)*, 1984 [Untitled (Poured Pictures)].[110] And ultimately, a work like *Achat*, 1987 [Agate: illus. 40], presents a multi-branched structure not as though it were some fixed form, but as though it were still in the process of coming into being.



40 Detail from *Achat*, 1987. Private collection

"The moving moved" – that was how Aristotle described the natural object, involved in an on-going process. In a similar sense the formal processes in Polke's works derive from the intrinsic motion of the material in a context initiated by the artist: "the moving moved."

### *Chance-Led Experiments*

It is worth remembering at this point that there was a very similar formal intention behind the experiments that Willi Baumeister, Oskar Schlemmer and Franz Krause carried out between 1940 and 1942 in the paint shops belonging to the industrialist, Dr Herbert, in Wuppertal. The keyword was 'modulation': "everyone knows how fascinating modulations are, for, after all, who has not had fun discovering figures in the veins in a piece of marble or in clouds or in wood grain; who has never gazed into the shimmering colours of a puddle of gas or petrol."[111] Modulation is used here to mean both the chance forms the paint takes and the chance forms of Nature. It is "almost completely independent of the creative intention. It is a Nature experience."[112] The paint experiments in Wuppertal (illus. 41), with results that sometimes seem closely related to Polke's poured pictures, were inspired by Leonardo's well-known advice to look in ashes, in clouds and in mud for what will elevate "the spirit to new feelings."[113] They were also inspired by the *Klexographien* ['Spillographs'] by the poet Justinus Kerner (1786 – 1862) and last of all by the products of 'decalco-

109 Stemmler 1986, n. p.
110 Illus. in exh. cat., Polke, Bonn 1988, p. 180
111 Willi Baumeister and Heinz Rasch, 'Modulation und Patina', in: exh. cat., Wuppertal 1979, n. p.
112 Ibid.
113 Ludwig 1882, I., 66

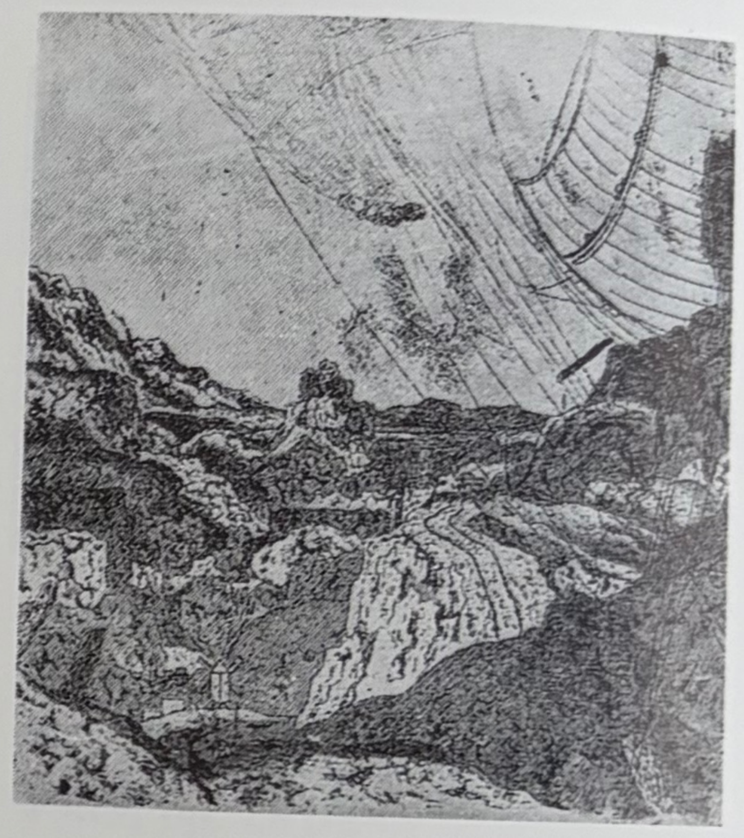
mania' that Schlemmer had found in the June 1936 edition of the Surrealist journal *Minotaur*.

Probably the first artist to make conscious use of chance in this way, was Hercules Seghers (c. 1589 – 1638). Polke counts him as one of his most important points of reference.[114] Unlike Andrea Mantegna (1431 – 1506), who creates an illusion of chance in the open region between cloud formations and cloud forms,[115] in Seghers' work, chance – as a heteronomous, non-assimilable element – destroys the illusionistic coherence of the image. The best known example of this is his engraving *Weg über einer Schlucht* [Path by a Gorge: illus. 42][116] where Seghers takes a fragment of ship's rigging from another engraving and incorporates it into the mountains above the gorge.

With his interest in artistic experiment, giving chance its rebellious head, Seghers proves to be an early kindred spirit of Polke's: "One picture has one effect, the next picture, even with the same elements, will by no means necessarily have the same effect. But I do know that if you sprinkle iron on it then the character is different to when you sprinkle aluminium on it. Iron has a completely different effect to copper, to zinc. And then I also work with tellurium and with apocryphal powders or with other powdered elements, just to see: what will they do [...]? Unpredictability – that's the interesting thing."[117]

Unpredictability is also the theme of Polke's second large wall-painting which he realised in 1989 in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (ARC). The wall, painted with heat-sensitive paint, only reveals its fantastic beauty when a particular temperature is reached. Then apparently homogeneous black metamorphoses into a realm of colour that ranges from vibrant blue, through green and violet right into the unfathomable depths. And here too – as in Venice – a chance-led process coincides as it were with living Nature.

41 Franz Krause, from *Modulation und Patina*, 1941–42

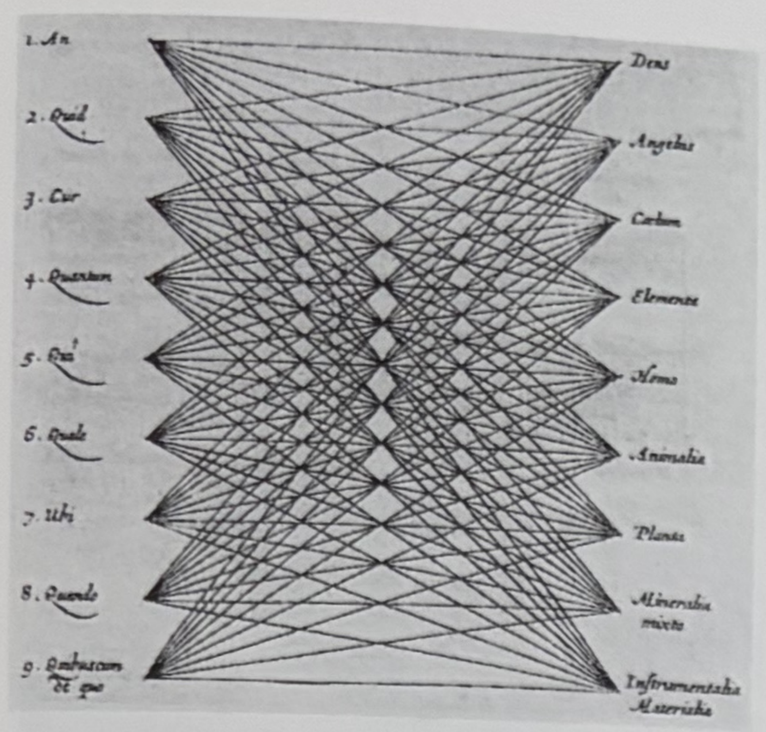


42 Hercules Seghers, *Weg über einer Schlucht*, early to mid 17th century

### *Magic Squares: a Secret World Order*

The potential of this 'coincidence' is an important motivator for Polke's lasting interest in magic and alchemy. The two come together yet again in the seven part series *Magische Quadrate I – VII*, 1992 [Magic Squares I – VII: see pp. 310, 311]. These go back to the cosmology of Ptolemy (c. 100 – 160 AD) who believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe and was surrounded by seven spheres of ether. Gnostic mythology, accepting the parallelism of the microcosm and the macrocosm, describes the influence of the planets on the formation of metals: "The assumption was that individual metals are various stages in the formation of one and the same basic material, which is in the process of reaching its ultimate stage, namely gold."[118] According to this system Saturn corresponded to lead, Jupiter to tin, Mars to iron, Venus to copper, Mercury to quicksilver, Luna to silver and Sol to gold. Any such notions of the mystic-numerical significance of planets and metals went back to Pythagoras who saw the number as the essence of all things: "The essence of things,

114 In conversation with Suzanne Pagé, exh. cat., Polke, Paris 1988, p. 8
115 See Janson 1961
116 Version I, HB 17 IIb, illus. in: Rowlands 1980
117 Schmidt-Wulffen 1988, p. 70
118 Roob 1996, p. 19; see also Telle 1980, col. 337ff. and Thiel 1980, pp. 70ff.




43 Athanasius Kircher, from *Ars magna sciendi*, Amsterdam, 1669

the ordering of the world is itself no more than the ordering of numbers [...] The [...] mathematical thinking of the Pythagoreans, however, does not refer exclusively – as in modern science – to quantitative relationships: on the contrary, since all things are seen as related to numbers, and can thus be understood as concentrated numbers, then it must also be possible to express qualities in numerical terms. And, vice versa, numbers acquire qualitative significance beyond their numerical significance, not only as arithmetical amounts but also as geometric figures."[119]

And in fact Polke does superimpose geometric figures on the number squares, although none that might be found in any textbook. Instead Polke hit upon the idea of linking the numbers in a numerical sequence. The results are startling because in their harmonious correlations they are distinctly similar to mathematical number sequences found elsewhere. It looks for all the world as though Polke has almost managed to track down the secret order that holds the Pythagorean universe together. In addition, the pictures are painted with seemingly metallic, iridescent colours that recall the old connections between planets and metals. Sometimes the numbers shimmer more brightly, sometimes it is the background – depending on where the viewer is standing. And the result is that one panel seems to emerge from the next, in the same way that all the different networks of the lineature seem to be part of one whole – reminiscent of the link that some writers have made between the planets, seven in number, and the seven stages of the alchemical process.

In some ways therefore, it might seem that here a magical world order is being constructed that is diametrically opposed to the scientific world order. Laszlo Glozer describes this as "found facts against the principle of usefulness ... resistance, not agitatory, but as the result of primarily artistic basic research – at the high point of our own impenetrable age."[120] This is entirely in keeping with the fact that number squares were originally credited with healing powers. For example, the magic square in Dürer's *Melancholia I*, 1514, symbolising the influence of Jupiter, has this iatro-mathematical meaning.[121]

The logic of these magic squares becomes more apparent if one takes into account the fact that Athanasius Kircher (1601–1680), following in the footsteps of Raimundus Lullus, developed a universal scheme (illus. 43) according to which Creation is "a web of structural analogies and correspondences," a combinatory act and a "process of multiplying by means of endless permutations [...]."[122] In fact the graphic schema explaining these processes is astonishingly similar to the figures in Polke's own works. It may therefore be concluded that the workings of Nature are expressed in his magic squares in an adequate manner, but at the same time in a previously undreamt-of manner: as magic permutations of colour, numbers and advanced geometry within the overall context of the macrocosm. And yet nothing is actually fixed in this cosmology which effortlessly takes on board Postmodern thinking as well: everything in these works is dependent on individual viewpoint, perception and comprehension – relying on the artist as inventor and on the viewer as explorer.

119 Ernst Bloch, quoted in Gebelein 1991, p. 129
120 Glozer 1992
121 See Klibansky/Panofsky/Saxl 1992, pp. 459ff.
122 Roob 1996, p. 289

### 7. Nature and History

The *Laterna Magica* involves a double perspective, things are subjected to re-vision. Similarly, the large-scale themes that have occupied Polke since the 80s, also involve a double perspective. These themes are Nature and History.

Not that these themes sprang from some sudden inspiration. From the outset Sigmar Polke has been alert to his own times, as readily found prowling about in the lowlands of the trivial as analysing the deceptions of our mediated, reified consumer world as reflecting on his own artistic activity in the light of the now historical myth of high art.

However, it is only following his new awareness of paint as a material, acquired during and directly after his travels in 1980/81, that Nature comes into play as a theme. Alchemy, in itself central to any hylozoïstic concept of Nature, presents itself as a welcome catalyst. Yet the more evident his interest in Nature, the more evident his interest in politics as a dialectical balance.

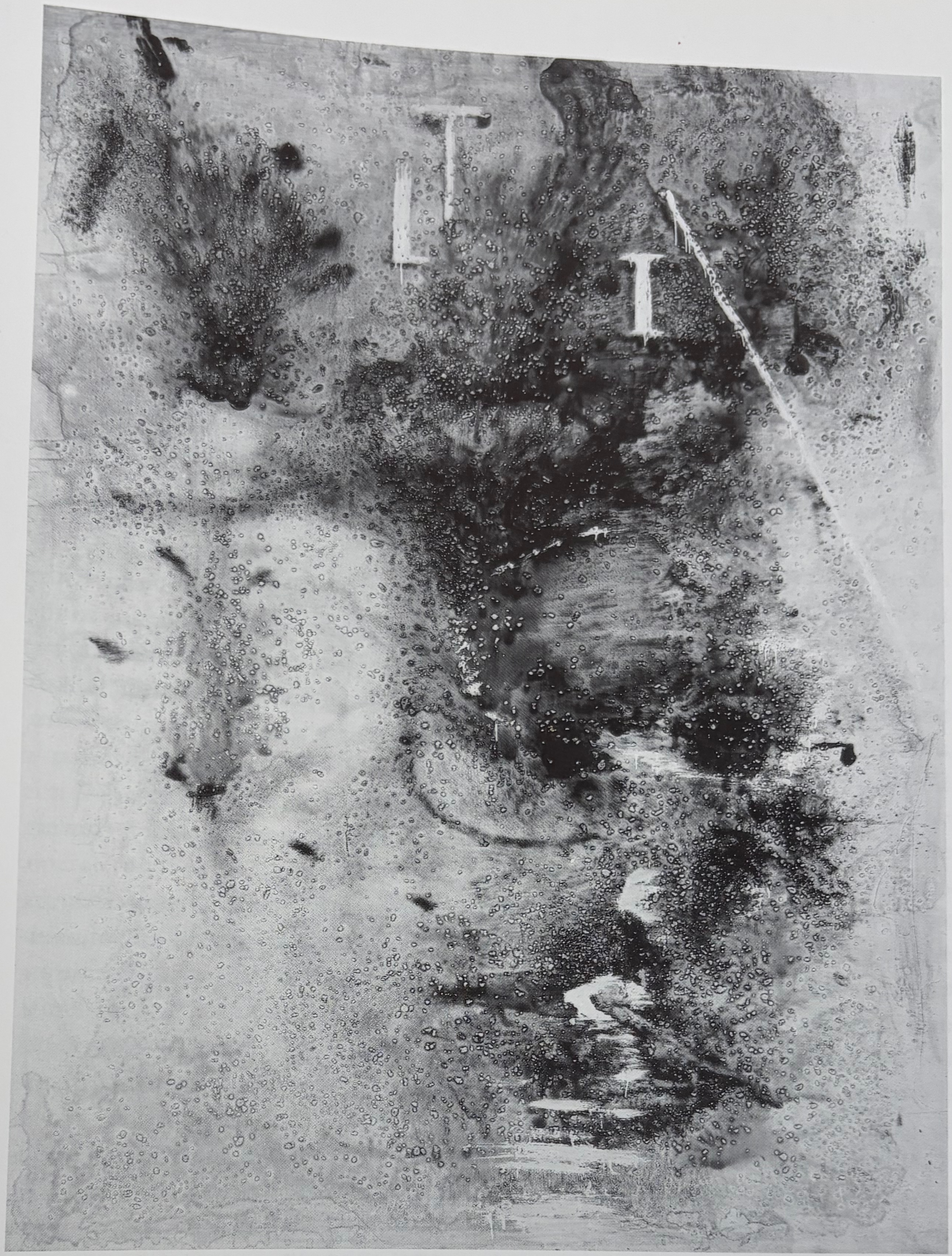
Let us start in the late 70s where *Dr. Bonn,* 1978 [see p. 175], stands out as a distinctly political commentary. On 18 October 1977, in the solitary confinement wing of the Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart, the bodies of the terrorists Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe were found – a strange and, to this day, never satisfactorily explained occurrence in the history of the judicial system in post-war Germany. Alluding to this, Polke painted a faceless bureaucrat caught in a glaring light, writing a report of these events under the gaze of portraits of Baader and Raspe. Having more than filled his wastepaper basket with crumpled rejects, in the end he places a taut catapult on his forehead to help him to do justice to the search for truth.

44 *Murphy Schnauzer*, 1996. Private collection

Such unfiltered glimpses of Federal reality are far and few between in Polke's work. It is not until the exhibition *Transit* in Schwerin in 1996 that Polke produces political work of comparable immediacy, in this case addressing German-German themes showing, for example, Erich Honecker's urn (*Ohne Titel*, 1996 [Untitled]) or the fruits of socialism as it really was (*Murphy Schnauzer*, 1996; illus. 44). As a rule his commentaries are somewhat more reserved and political themes are handled on a historical level.

On 9 August 1981, three days after the 36th anniversary of Hiroshima, President Reagan announced that the neutron bomb was going into production – a decision that caused dismay and outrage even amongst his European allies, because it seemed that this step was one step closer to the possibility of nuclear war. And indeed at the time the spectre of a nuclear war that could be confined to European soil was sighted in the Pentagon's corridors of power.[123] Shortly before this Reagan had secured funding for neutron armaments production by winning Congress's approval for swingeing cuts in the welfare budget. Polke addresses the problem in his five part work, *Reagan 1–3, Das Problem Europa, Sargdeckel*, 1981 [Reagan 1–3, The Problem of Europe, Coffin Lid: see pp. 250, 251], using a photograph from the front

123 See the *Spiegel* cover story 'Reagans Neutronen-Schock. Schlachtfeld Deutschland', *Der Spiegel,* no. 34/17, 8 (1981), pp. 17–29




45 *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imp.)*, 1983. Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart

page of *Welt am Sonntag* on 9 August 1981. Unaware of the impending 'neutron shock' this picture, taken directly after the cuts to the welfare budget had been agreed, shows the President with a drawing he had made of himself.[124] This photograph is repeatedly photocopied and *Reagan 1 – 3* shows three stages in this process during which the double image of the President gradually dissolves. In the third picture the vanishing outline merges into a red and white glowing ground: a vision of nuclear destruction. In the fourth picture Polke incorporates the myth of the Rape of Europa which now suddenly acquires new relevance. Finally, *Sargdeckel* brings the whole to a concise and significant conclusion.

It is perhaps worth adding here that shortly after this Joseph Beuys was one of the performers on a record with the title *Sonne statt Reagan* [Sun instead of Reagan]: a word-play on the American President's name which sounds like 'Regen' meaning 'rain' in German. The title was later used as a slogan for the massive peace demonstrations in Bonn on 10 June 1982.

*Polyvalent Pictorial Processes*

It was at this time that Polke painted *Lager*, 1982 [Camp: see p. 249]. This is the first work where a political theme is portrayed using the same techniques as in the 'alchemical' works. The electrified barbed wire fence of Auschwitz is the subject, but the picture carrier was first treated with spillages of pigment and charcoal. In Polke's own words: "It's a picture about telling a story, a picture about passing on rumours, for I have never experienced a bomb attack. But I understood emotionally what it was about from being told. [...] The camp, the fenced-in space, the boundaries, it is all there down to the last detail, even down to the charcoal. Painting with a glowing ember, the canvas began to glow, steamed."[125]

In these remarks it becomes clear once more that the pictorial processes are indeed polyvalent. Where one picture is concerned with the unpredictability of natural-evolutionary processes, another may use the same methods as a catalyst to bring a political theme to life.

This can be seen equally well in the various versions of *Hochsitz*, 1984–1988 [Hunting Tower: see p. 243], where silver nitrate and silver bromide turn the forester's vantage point into the watchtower of a totalitarian regime.

The holocaust as a theme continues to occupy Polke, whether in the shape of the apparently indifferent crowd waiting outside the exhibition that perhaps provoked the first ever coincidence of art and blatant demagogy (*Entartete Kunst*, 1983 [Degenerate Art]) or whether in the picture *LTI*, 1983 (illus. 45). If one did not know the title, *LTI* might certainly be read on analogy with other chance-led, natural process works: the picture carrier has had layer upon layer of lacquer poured on to it, which have drawn together to form a black-brown cloud of indeterminate depth. But the title, incorporated as an abbreviation into the work itself sounds the alert. It refers to the book by the social commentator and critic, Victor Klemperer,

124 This means that, although up until now this work has consistently been listed in catalogues with 1908 as the date, this is clearly wrong.
125 Parkett, no. 26 (1990), p. 17

with its detailed and revelatory examination of the language of fascism in all its ramifications, whether in official speeches or in the apparently innocuous language of individual members of society. Seen in this light the picture is transformed and the process of transformation resembles the revelatory and self-reflective nature of Klemperer's analysis. In Klemperer's own words: "Books and papers, the language of authority and official forms – everything was swimming in the same brown soup [..]."[126] Thus Polke's picture becomes, at one and the same time, an *a posteriori* menetekel and a warning to the 'late born.'

*The Availability of the World – the Non-Availability of the Picture*

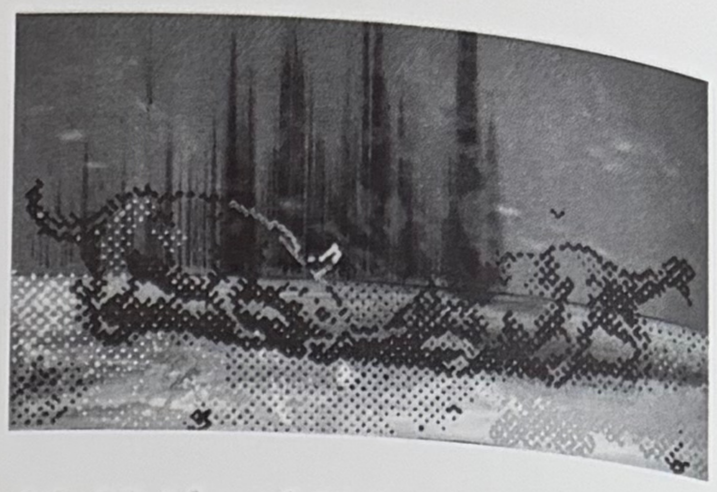
It should not be forgotten that all these works were being produced at the same time as Polke's experiments with paint substances and picture carriers. These latter works were above all a response to the impulse to introduce the unimaginable and the unsayable into the realms of the possible, that are opened up by the category 'picture.' "What would actually happen if..." could be the motto of Polke's determination to go on pushing back the boundaries of what a picture can do. As this essay has already shown, this then sets in motion evolutionary processes that imitate the processes of living, 'poietic' Nature, right up to the level of the macrocosm. This necessarily also involves a temporal horizon that contemporary society has largely banished to the outer reaches of its awareness. Natural time is of course still familiar to us as the welcome or unwelcome return of the summer and winter, day and night.

This cycle is, however, increasingly becoming a nuisance – unavoidable yet extraneous – because everything is geared towards the goals that society sets itself: these operate on their own time scale and are only minimally determined by the rhythms of natural time. Countless instruments and devices have been invented to break through the rhythms of natural time, to render it meaningless. For example, Virilio reports that "on 31 December 1976, 40 Americans flew to Paris and disembarked simply in order to celebrate New Year's Eve there, then took off in Concorde to celebrate New Year's Eve on board before landing in Washington to celebrate New Year's Eve in the French Embassy there..."[127] Global transport and communications networks have long since developed their own time and rhythms. Everything is supposed to be available all the time all over the world.

Whenever Polke, on the other hand, allows chance to play a part in the genesis of his works, then the world of images proves to be 'non-available.' This could not be more clearly demonstrated than on the conch wall in the Pavilion in Venice. Given that, in this case, the 'image' is already a thing of chance and as such, unfixed, then this non-availability is heightened by the cycle of day and night, of warmth and cold. Here natural time in fact serves as the *movens* and catalyst for all the various metamorphoses that the picture undergoes. The picture positioned opposite the conch wall presents an anti-world to the latter. Viewers find them-

126 Klemperer 1996, p. 18
127 Virilio 1989, p. 129

selves witnessing a police identity check, as found the world over. *Sieht man ja, was es ist* 1984 [You can see what it is: see p. 253]: a black and white raster picture like an enlarged reportage shot that could hardly be more sober: an arrested image. The control mechanisms being peddled here point towards a concept of time that is dialectically opposed to hydro-painting: a concept of time "as the heteronomous ordering of bourgeois obligation."[128] The fact that Polke took this motif from an Italian film that was distributed in Germany with the title *Keine Zeit für Wunder* [No Time for Miracles][129] not only demonstrates Polke's roguish irony once again, for, more importantly, the picture itself is symbolic, like *Amerikanisch-Mexikanische Grenze* [American-Mexican Border: see p. 252] from the same year. It tells the viewer that all things unpreconceivable and wonderful, as in the wall painting, may only be viewed within the context of the political forces that undeniably govern us; and, vice versa, that only those who open their eyes to the unpreconceivable as a real possibility will be able to free themselves from this sad reality.



46 *Neid und Habgier II (Zwei Hunde und ein Knochen kommen selten zu einer Einigung)*, 1985. Kunsthaus Zürich

47 Detail from Frans Hogenberg, *Die Blau Huicke*, 1558

### *Global Horizon*

A similar global view is found in the picture *Neid und Habgier II (Zwei Hunde und ein Knochen kommen nicht leicht zu einer Einigung)*, 1985 [Envy and Avarice II (Two Dogs and a Bone do not Easily Reach Agreement): illus. 46], which was also in the German Pavilion at Venice. Two stocky dogs, painted as screen dot images, are tugging at a bone. Beyond and through their bodies runs the horizon, above which a gigantic, eerie expanse of sky seems to open up. The picture's few motifs go back to whole variety of sources. The tugging dogs may well go back to an engraving [illus. 47] published in 1558 with the title: *Der blaue Mantel wird dies meist genannt, doch als Torheiten der Welt wäre es besser bekannt* [The blue coat is what this is mostly called, but a better name were the follies of the world]. From there the dogs found their way into Pieter Breugel's *Niederländische Sprichwörter*, 1559 [Netherlandish Sayings], which depicts a topsy-turvy world, ruled by envy (invidia) and avarice (avaritia), by self-deception and hypocrisy. At the same time, Polke's picture ground evokes thoughts of Dürer's watercolour *Traumgesicht*, 1525 [Face in a Dream]. The whole apocalyptic scene has often been interpreted in the light of contemporary experience as a "vision of nuclear destruction"[130] In Polke's work, Dürer's columns of water have become mighty showers of ash.

*Neid und Habgier II* was of course produced during a time of feverish re-armament, when the phantasmagoria of world-enveloping star wars were terrifyingly able to mobilise an all too real stock-pile of weapons.[131] This global horizon is reflected in the picture. It seems all the more uncanny because of the beguiling, although completely artificial, beauty of the colours accompanying whatever it is – something that defies comprehension – that is breaking over the scene in the background – evidently unnoticed by the dogs although they have clearly sparked it off:

128 Zimmermann 1982, p. 141
129 *Keine Zeit für Wunder*, directed by Luigi Comencini, France/Italy 1982
130 Berger 1985, including a reproduction of Dürer's watercolour
131 See *Der Spiegel*, no. 11 (1985), pp. 120 – 148

an atmosphere to take one's breath away. The realms of colour that emerge here, in this particular form, may again be read as a counterpart to the wall-painting in the apse. The potential of Creation faces the potential of destruction, and Polke shows himself to be the contemporary artist that he is, by the way that the two seem to complement each other in the manner of a 'concordia discors.'

In Venice, Nature and history were put into the same melting pot, which Polke then called *Athanor* after the oven used by alchemists for its capacity to maintain a steady fire over an extended period of time. The title indicated that the works in the Pavilion were still in the making. That is to say: Polke is far from proposing some peaceful reconciliation between Nature and history. On the contrary, the very polarisation of their qualities reveals Polke's own Utopia, where Nature comprises a higher and more comprehensive form of reason than does history.

Indeed Polke is more than critical of historical 'reason' elsewhere too. In 1988 the whole of France was joining in the general jubilation on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution that had established bourgeois principles on the basis of social 'reason'. Polke created a cycle of wholly pessimistic pictures in response to this. *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, 1988 [see p. 275] – the title of one of the works in this cycle – are seen as the spawn of a brutal form of violence that crushes human beings underfoot.

On the other hand, in the same year Polke also painted a cycle that holds out some kind of a wishful dream, or even promise, against his earlier bitter reconstruction of history. His homage to the indigenous people of North America, *The Spirits that Lend Strength are Invisible*, 1988,[132] uses tellurium, nickel, silver and meteor dust and, as Thomas McEvilley has shown, points to the possibility of incorporating "Nature into culture as a potentially healing force."[133]

Nature and civilisation come directly up against each other on the back and the front of the picture *Jeep*, 1992 [see p. 302], with a wooden veneer glued to the back, and when this happens, Nature is not seen as the cyclical phenomenon as in Venice and in *The Spirits…*, but instead as having been degraded for the purposes of Capitalist exploitation: Nature that has literally been split apart and divided up in terms of value for money.

The counterpart to this on the human level is found in the picture *Flüchtende*, 1992 [Refugees: see p. 280]: people, clutching their few possessions try to cross a border which is, however, tragically inscribed into their own bodies.[134] Another example might be the picture *Flüchtlingslager*, 1994 [Refugee Camp: see p. 281]: families behind barbed wire sitting out their lives in a hutment – individual incidents and episodes in a time of mass exodus and ethnic wars where the persecution of minorities is the order of the day.

In his treatment of these themes Polke's use of colour is particularly significant. On the back of the translucent picture carrier of *Flüchtlingslager* mighty pools of dark violet, green, yellow and red paint show through to the front to a greater or

132 Illus. in: exh. cat., Polke, San Francisco 1990, nos 65 – 69
133 McEvilley 1991, p. 52
134 See Tosatto 1994, pp. 19, 87

lesser degree – in places the paint still seems to be in motion while in other places it has already solidified into dull or glowing pools of colour. Although the paint is apparently autonomous, independent of the rastered motif, it does nevertheless of course intervene in the actual scenario just as the representational motif affects the way the colour is read. Thus paint and colour take on many meanings: heaven and dirt, hope and despair, mild light and murky light, remembering and forgetting. Indeed, colour lends identity to an unidentifiable location, which now could be mistaken for none other.

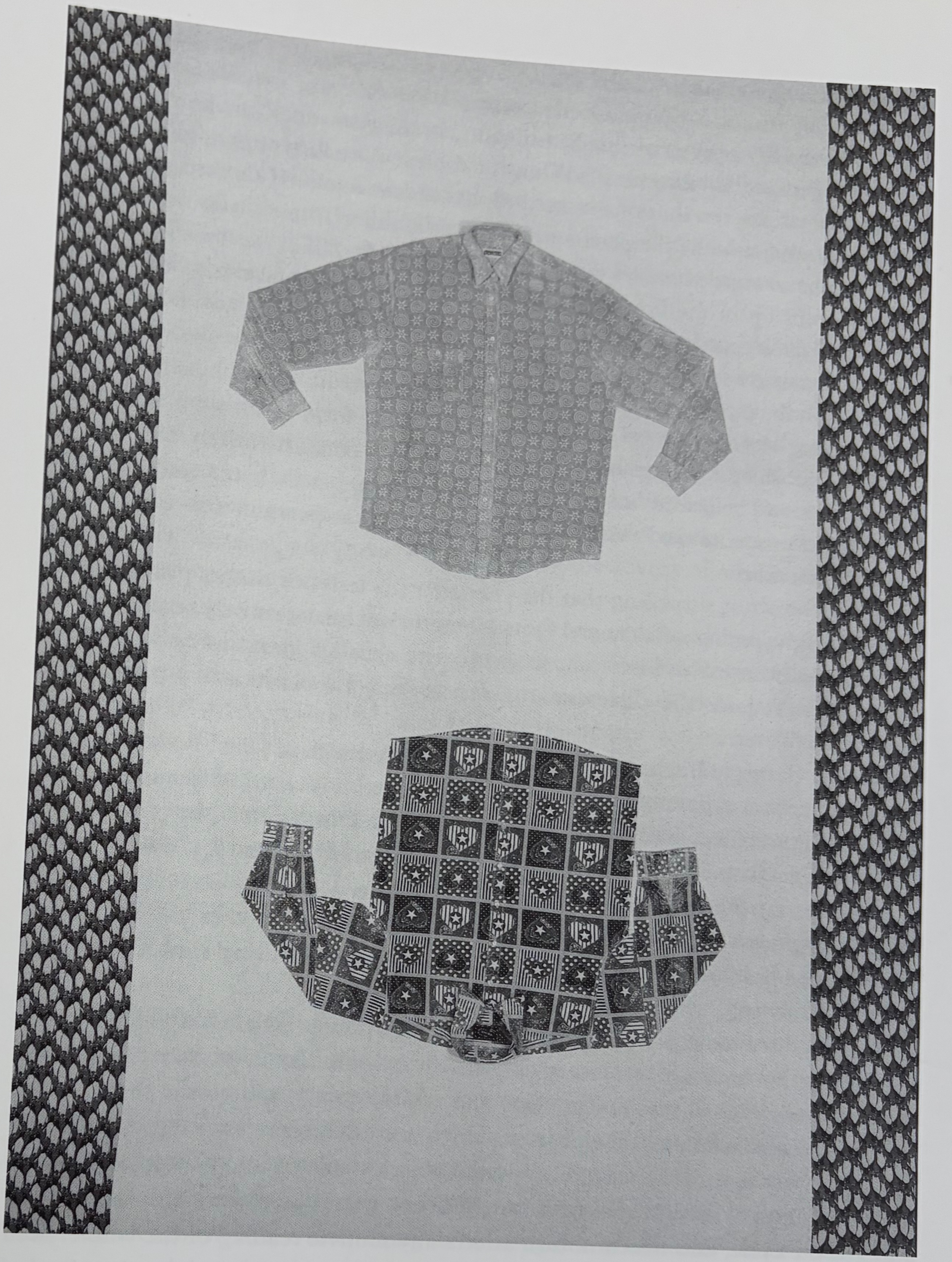
The ambivalence of the readings that emerge from paint spillages and self-propelled paint trails is not in any way lessened by the use of rastering grids. Whilst in the 60s the raster functioned primarily as a structured mediator, more recently Polke has been developing its potential to convey the numinous.

The vast picture *Marienerscheinung*, 1994 [Vision of Mary: see p. 313], is already moving in this direction. What does the raster depict? It is possible to make out the schematic edge of the wall of a building and, even less distinct, there is an oval shape that seems to flow across the whole picture like some kind of ectoplasm. One might imagine that the shapes at the lower edge of the picture are figures seen from behind, perhaps reminiscent of the figures in Caspar David Friedrich's works – caught up in the spectacle of Nature. Yet any hints of figurative imagery are constantly on the verge of slipping away, chimeras emerge only to vanish again instantly. Thus the raster operates paradoxically just like the colour spillages where strange shapes and grimaces break out of the structures created by the movement of the paint.

A raster can also be used to convey imagination mingled with memory as in *Ziegenwagen*, 1992 [Goat Cart: see p. 305]. Against a ground of motifs from 50s fabrics a raster motif emerges, open-ended and without closure: memories of a childhood characterised by simplicity which – however irretrievable it may seem – is nevertheless firmly anchored in the collective consciousness.

The gently pleading tone of this work clearly has a counterweight in the cold exposure of that same ideology in *Gemeinschaftswerk Aufschwung Ost*, 1992 [Joint Project Upswing East: see p. 277]. This was the time in Germany where the real dichotomy of the slogan of reunification ('Aufschwung Ost') became all too evident; a time of growing mass-unemployment, of unbridgeable ideological differences and of Capitalist speculation that smacked of the early days of industrialisation. Polke reacted to this by using allegory to depict work and capital, as in the fabric pictures where, for the first time, entire shirts and trousers are worked into the whole.

*Zwei Hemden*, 1994 [Two Shirts: illus. 48], is an example of this. On each side of the picture there are two strips of penguin pattern, running in the opposite direction to each other, in keeping with the two shirts, one upside down and the other the right way up. The ordering of the picture displays a double dialectic. On the one hand, two shirts are set against each other with designs that speak of the promises of



48 *Zwei Hemden*, 1994.
Private collection

happiness that shops use to bamboozle the people in the street – two shirts, clearly related yet appealing to quite different tastes: West Germany meets East Germany and vice versa. On the other hand, penguins, in their 'tuxedos', invariably call to mind thoughts of the ruling classes. Thus the continuous bands of pattern to left and to right demarcate the shirts' permitted room for manoeuvre. This then reveals the picture's meaning: while the person-in-the-street is still grappling with the ideological and cultural imponderables that have arisen from the fall of the wall, he or she is already swept up in the flow of capital in both directions which pays no heed to ideological differences. And yet at the same time, this work may also be read as a homage to those ordinary people, and in this sense the isolated positioning of the two shirts in the picture space lends them a positively heroic aspect. In another work in this series, *Mercedes*, 1994 [see p. 282], this heroic form is taken up again. One single 'rustic' shirt is set against a fabric pattern that consists entirely of Mercedes stars. Above and below: Work and Capital are seen here in the same relationship as in the depictions from the Peasants' Wars which show the peasants above the church and the aristocracy.

It is by now not surprising that the year after his series of clothes pictures Polke returned to the realms of alchemy. On the contrary, it seems entirely cogent in view of the overall context of his recent work; cogent since his forays into society's past and present require the dialectical balance of his Utopian view of non-reified Nature.

For the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1995, Polke produced a four picture series (winning the Jury Prize along with Richard Artschwager) dedicated to the mythical founder of alchemy, *Hermes Trismegistos* [see p. 316]. The basic motif is taken from a floor mosaic in the Cathedral in Siena. It show the magus granting the Egyptians the gift of writing and jurisprudence. It is accompanied by a Latin inscription: "God, the Creator of all things, created another visible god and that was the first god that he created and the only one to bring Him joy: and He loved His only son, who there is called the Holy Word."

For the three main pictures in this series, Polke poured paint over the entire rear surface of the translucent picture carriers. The combination of water-based and water-resistant paints resulted in veins and faults, streaks and cracks that seem to evoke the sense of an on-going process, which in turn interprets the representational scenario. Although the series has only one subject, depicted in a variety of different ways, in fact the viewer witnesses a 'colour event' that is greater than the sum of the parts of the cycle, and which in turn affects any motivic reading of the whole. Seen in its entirety, the cycle points towards the *magnum opus*, the transmutation and purification processes of alchemy, during the course of which colour goes from black through white to red. The individual steps of this process are described in alchemical terms as chemical stages in the completion of Nature and as spiritual stages in the purification of the soul.[135] The last picture in the series which focuses

135 See Gebelein 1991, pp. 45ff.

solely on Hermes Trismegistos, thus elevated to the level of portraiture, seems to be a concentrated version of this process of transformation: black and red paint spillages mingle to create a constellation of colour that is to be read on a cosmological level. The relationship of above and below, of the front and the back of the picture seems to embody that all-embracing interconnection described in the *Tabula Smaragdina* which is attributed to Hermes Trismegistos: "Everything that is above is like everything that is below and everything that is below is like everything that is above, that the secret of unity may fulfil itself."[136]

How can one explain Polke's persistent interest in alchemy through the years when it is dismissed by scientists as esoteric and hence socially irrelevant? Leaving aside the fact that the chemical knowledge that was employed in the practice of alchemy is couched in such hermetic language as to be only partially comprehensible, nevertheless alchemy still, even now, comprises a grand design for life. Alchemy presents a model of a syncretic science embracing hermetic teachings, cabala, non-denominational Christianity, medicine, astronomy and mechanics, all united under its wing, and it was only ousted by the advent of modern science with its insistence on quantification.

Nowadays, the notion of scientific progress has developed noticable fault lines and in itself is becoming a visible social problem, in that it openly countenances the global destruction of all living things. It is against this backdrop that "dreamed knowledge"[137] – recognising the macrocosm in the microcosm – arises like a phoenix from the ashes. Thus the connections between alchemy and chaos theory are already incalculable. Alchemy is like the paradigm of a world-embracing project, still to be defined as yet, but which would be directed towards reclaiming Nature. Only once this had been achieved could there be any reconciliation between Nature and history.

Sigmar Polke opens up the portals leading in this direction, by providing dreamed pictures for the dreaming eye, which alone can make this project happen.

### *The Two Eyes of Irony*

Polke's œuvre since the 80s is notable in two respects: on the one hand Polke emerges as a tireless experimenter, intent on driving painting beyond the bounds of convention into barely charted territory. 'Terra incognita' was the term used in old maps and the many tales that told how a person first set foot in a wholly unknown land give an idea of the quaking and sense of adventure that accompanied such a step. The alchemist, too, was entering terra incognita when he set about adding new substances and transforming a known solution, without having the slightest idea as to the outcome. This spirit lives on in Polke in the moment when he avails himself of materials that have long since been declared obsolete by our highly sophisticated paint industry and by current teachings on the techniques of painting alike, or, if not obsolete, toxic and to be avoided at all costs. The freedom to ignore all of this, goes

136 Quoted in Eliade 1994, vol. 3/1, p. 243
137 Ibid., p. 248

hand in hand with the freedom to give chance free reign. Thus the adventure of terra incognita is simply transposed into the pictorial process: a terrain that discovers itself in the proper motion of tinctures, lacquers and pigment and which in its transformability and unpredictability comes close to the volatility of the processuality of creative Nature, which, as we know, is always incalculable to a certain degree. Meanwhile the territory of the picture becomes a place where the chaos from the beginning of time returns in order to unfold its creative potential. The direction that this potential will take is only vaguely identifiable. However, it is clearly not Polke's intention to 'occupy' this unknown territory and to subject it to his rule, but to disseminate his own experience of the unforeseeable, holding the picture – the terrain – open for whatever might happen, for the *possible*.

Polke took a decisive step when he opened up the picture carrier from both sides – front and back – so that the two-sided painting and the picture carrier would become one by osmosis. "I wanted to create a mirror using lacquer" – Polke's own description of his early work on transparents – "where you stand in front of it and see what is behind you. The next thing is: while you are seeing what is behind you, you are thinking about what is in front of you, but which you can't see. For the illusion is already perfectly there."[138]

This 'experimental set-up' as the artist himself calls it resolves the prospective potency that is inherent in the picture as a planimetric projection surface. And, in a countermove, it also opens up the possibility of a *reversed process of seeing*. It is as though Polke foreshortens the view through the 'open window' of the picture to such an extent that one's gaze gets caught in the window pane itself. The process of seeing is not directed towards what is behind the glass but instead towards the space where the painter is and which is reflected in the pane. Thus the viewer is confronted with a reversal of perspective where the reflection of one's own seeing becomes the subject of the painting.

On the other hand – as is clear from Polke's remarks – in this experiment the observation of the lacquer surfaces conflates with the imaginative seeing that the lacquer painting instigates. Thus as soon as the painter sets about representing the shapes of the room that he sees in the reflective surface of the picture, the picture inexorably turns into a prospective scenario. But on the way there, the eye is subjected to the highest possible tension, which tests the eyes' resistance to the utmost. This tension is the result of the superimposition of the reflection of the room on its own perception. At this point *perceptive* and *imaginative* seeing divide and mingle at one and the same time.

Thus the picture is no longer a view, a window or a mirror, yet all these modalities seem meanwhile to have come together in the picture itself. For the first time in the history of painting the picture presents itself as only loosely connected to its own picture carrier. And the picture carrier becomes completely porous: open to real space. That is one side of the coin.

138 Sigmar Polke in conversation with the author on December 19, 1994

The other is that Polke is a critical observer of his own times, constantly collecting up debris and saving it in his own pictures which form little eddies in the current of forgetting that increases with each successive event in the politics of the day.

Where, we have to ask, is the *tertium comparationis* of this polarisation? The answer lies in Polke's ironic relationship to the world. Peter Szondi has shown that in the case of the Romantics, their irony was based on their view of their own times as a "period of historical and philosophical transition [...] of no-longer and not-yet, the negativity of which only made sense in terms of the remembered thesis of the past and their sense of a future Utopian synthesis."[139] Thus, as Friedrich Schlegel puts it in the 116th Athaneum Fragment: Romantic poetry is "still in the process of becoming; indeed that is its very essence, that it is eternally only becoming, can never be complete."[140] Fragments were the preferred form amongst Romantic writers, and were themselves not seen "as what had not yet been achieved, as something that had never been more than a fragment, but rather as anticipation and promise."[141] And, as Szondi shows in his discussion of Tieck's comedies, drama was the form in which the early Romantics realised "what can only ever be a goal in real life: the connection between being-in-this-world and standing-above-this-world."[142]

In Kierkegaard's words: "On the one side stands the given reality with all its paltry philistinism; on the other, the ideal actuality with all its dimly emerging shapes."[143] This sense of discrepancy is the basis of Romantic irony – hence, Friedrich Schlegel's paradigmatic declaration: "It [irony] contains and creates a sense of the inextinguishable conflict of the unconstrained and the constrained, of the impossibility and necessity of complete communication."[144]

Of course it would be going too far if one were to apply precisely this eschatological aspect of the historical and philosophical constructs of Romantic thinking to the works by Polke that are nourished by the 'alchemy of paint.' Without crossing the threshold to the realms of idealised reality, Polke's works point towards exactly that lack of constraint that Schlegel talks of – insofar as their processuality means that they are constantly re-organising and dis-organising and thereby eluding any final definition or predictability. And, conversely, in the encounter between 'alchemistic' and political images we are at the same time referred back to the constraints, that today express themselves in the repressive power of the militaristic-industrial-scientific power structures currently bent on a programme of universal social control.

Seen in this light it is clear that Polke's 'alchemistic' and political works are dialectically mutually illuminating. But the driving force behind this dialectic is irony. Thus Oskar Becker, developing Solger's concept of irony, talks of the two eyes of irony: the 'waking,' 'sober' eye destroys what it sees by critically rendering the present 'absent,' that is, distances itself from the present; on the other hand, the second of the two eyes of irony is a 'dreaming' eye, floating up above everything.[145] And indeed, in order to do Polke's recent works justice, the viewer must regard them with these two eyes, taking equal note of the real and the possible.

139 Szondi 1964, p. 6
140 Schlegel 1958ff. vol. 2, p. 183
141 Szondi 1964, p. 13
142 Ibid., p. 22
143 Kierkegaard 1989, pp. 304f.
144 Schlegel 1958ff., vol. 2, p. 160 (Lyceumsfragment no. 108)
145 See Becker 1929, pp. 50f.

*Fragmentary Consciousness – the Combinatory Spirit*

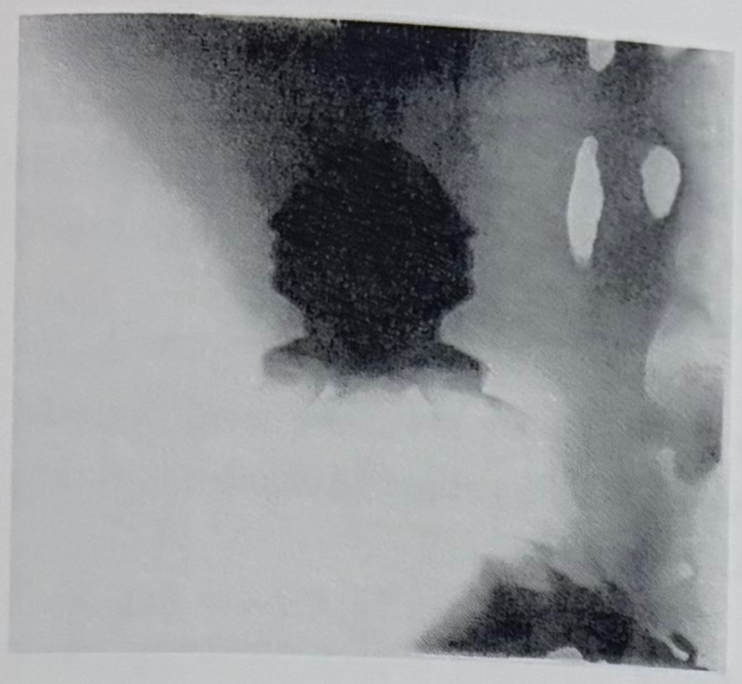
"Who, what is Sigmar Polke?" – this was the question posed by Barbara Reise in her essay of the same name.[146] In his *Selbstbildnis*, 1971 [Self Portrait: illus. 49], Polke enigmatically presents himself as Janus, the Roman god who absorbs contradiction and at the same time symbolises the unity of the past and the future: a high aim to set oneself. In addition to this, Janus also connects the sun and the moon, male and female and, in that sense, has about him something of the androgynous human form that was to be recreated in the 'conjunctio' of alchemy. Thus Janus may also be equated with the primal chaos that Schelling referred to.[147] The materia prima of chaos contains within it the potential creation of the world, which leads Nietzsche to his comment that "one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."[148] The concept of chaos "in the name of the persistently different, mulitfariously-individual, sues the false unification and reduction of plurality for the right of existence of transitions and border-crossings."[149] At every turn we see Polke as someone who lives on the edge: on the border between high and low culture, good and bad taste, the sublime and the ridiculous, Nature and civilisation. He is the artist who tills the alluvial soil of our cultural inheritance, gathering up any cultural detritus as he goes. And he does this with a degree of wit. For, as Friedrich Schlegel tells us, wit is a combinatory spirit, consisting in the "ability to detect the similarities between objects that are otherwise very independent, different and separate [...]."[150]

As does alchemy, so, too, does wit dissolve spiritual materials at the same time as acting as a binding agent. In light of this, it is surprisingly capricious and unpredictable, "a flash of lightning from the subconscious world which always exists for us alongside the conscious world, and which, by this means, aptly demonstrates the *fragmentary nature of our consciousness*."[151]

In Polke's work the fragmentary broadens out into an awareness of heterogeneity, polyperspectivity and multivalence. In pictorial terms it leads to metamorphoses, where everything real could intrinsically be something other: this demonstrably applies equally to screen dot works, fabric works, spillage pictures and transparents. The alchemy of paint is inherently metamorphic.

But where one thing can become another, then the result is a kind of *magia naturalis*,[152] a world where everything is interconnected. If this was originally a concept expressing the fundamental unity of all things, in Polke's work it becomes an expression of fragmentary absent-mindedness. It is the absent-mindedness that the ironist seeks who is said to have an encyclopaedic interest in all things and all forms. This interest is paired with scepticism, a degree of reservation in the face of all things and all forms, above all in the face of the vocabulary of closure that is validated by metaphysics. The ironist does not assume that "there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances."[153] Thus he places pictorial elements in a mid-way state of transformability.

146 Reise 1976/77
147 Schelling 1973, pp. 603ff.
148 Nietzsche 1909, p. 12
149 Scobel 1989, p. 284
150 Quoted in Best 1989, p. 79
151 Friedrich Schlegel, quoted in ibid, p. 76 (author's italics)
152 See Crary 1990
153 Rorty 1989, p. 74



49 *Selbstbildnis*, 1971

Reservation and interest combine to nurture a world of radical plurality, namely the 'condition postmoderne.' In an anticipation of Postmodern philosophy, Novalis states that "pluralism is our innermost being and perhaps every person has their own part in what I think and do, as do I in the thoughts of other people."[154]

This is the basis on which Sigmar Polke included himself in *Fotokreis (Menschenkreis)*, 1968. In an interview two years earlier he had already provided food for thought: "You see, I have so to speak split myself apart in order not to be unfair to myself nor to those outside of myself, nor to somehow oppress them. Perhaps everything will come back together again sometime, I can't say, I am quite happy about this kind of many-sidedness, I am happy that I don't just see black and white, but both at once."[155]

This brings us back to Janus, the god with two faces. Janus does not only reconcile the opposites that meet in the experiments with paints and tinctures. He also invariably mixes "the sanctified with the profane, the high with the low, the large with the tiny, the wise with the foolish."[156] And as such he enthrones a carnivalesque world where all existence is relative, and where change and transformation derive their strength from that ironic glance that takes in all things and only destroys in order to renew.

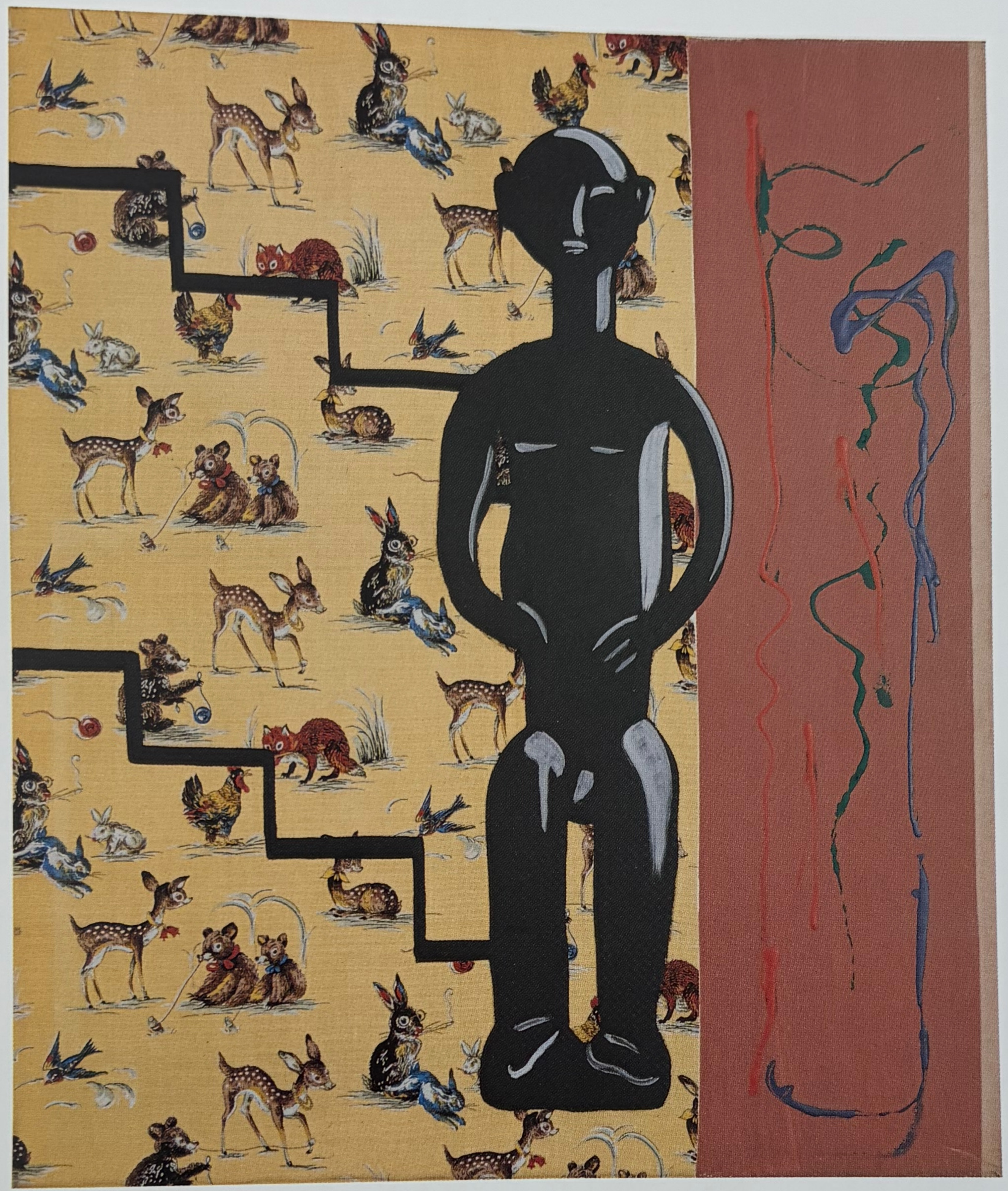
From the German by Fiona Elliott

154 Quoted in Frank 1989, p. 270
155 Hülsmann 1966
156 Bakhtin 1969, p. 49

Das zehnte Foto, das in Pasadena aufgezeichnet wurde. Es zeigt die Mond–oberfläche am Landeplatz von „Surveyor–1". Der Stein im Bild links vorne ist 15,0 cm hoch und 30,8 cm lang. Die hellen Punkte sind Sonnenreflexe.

Stadtbild I 1969

Reiherbild III 1968



Negerplastik 1968

Mit gelben Quadraten 1968

Reh 1968

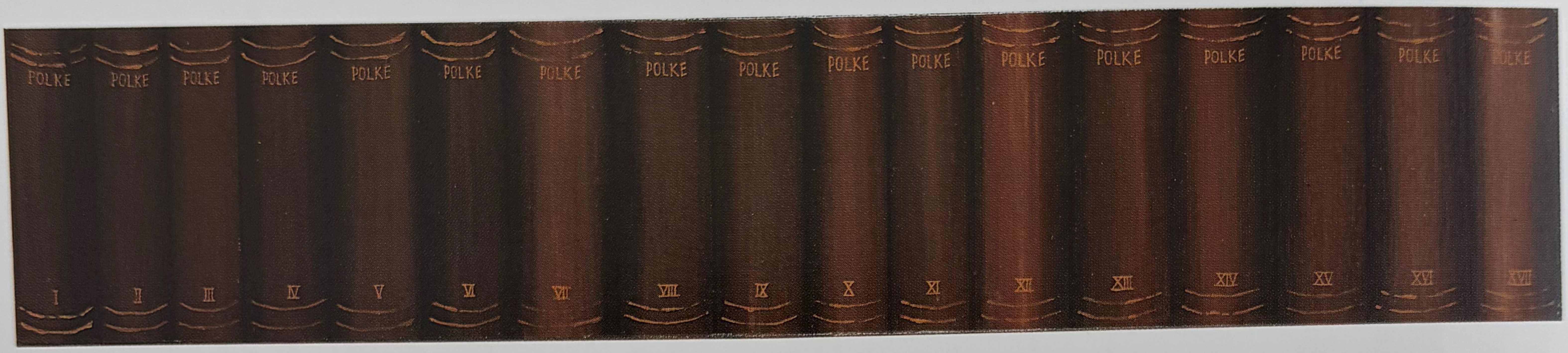
Streifenbild I 1967

Dürer-Hase 1968

Moderne Kunst 1968

Blauer Gedankenkreis 1974

Tibersprung II 1971




Polkes gesammelte Werke 1969

HANS BELTING

# On Lies and Other Truths of Painting
## Several Thoughts for S.P.

### *The Truth (in) of Painting*

"Painting after painting" today makes use of the new freedom it has been given since all the futile obituaries. Many a misunderstanding about the limits and duties of painting have been settled and suddenly, painting again demonstrates what it can be, what it always has been – what it never has been even if it could have been. No longer has it to choose between art and the images bombarding our consciousness, between its own *truth of painting* and a different *truth in painting*. In the age of dogmatic Modernism these all seemed incompatible contradictions, like faith and error. The error of strict adherence to faith and an unwavering faith in the courage to err are now coming to light.

We have not yet entirely accustomed ourselves to a form of painting which is once again unashamedly painting and no longer succumbs to that programme which we usually rather thoughtlessly call ART. The "art of painting" had long been around when ART, in its abstract dignity, was still a long time in coming, which is why painting has returned at a time when ART is losing something of its monopoly. In art there can be no lies, only truth, which itself is fictitious – at least an uncertain idea. It would be a great reproach to speak of lies in ART, but in painting it is an accurate description.

Painting has beautiful, old lies at its command, if one may so refer to its tried and tested stage direction of our perceptions which we like a curious theatre audience await. We do not only perceive the world through painting. But in painting there is a dialogue between ourselves and the person pulling the strings behind our perception. This silent dialogue makes painting delightful and mysterious.

But what is painting? A coat of paint? Decoration? Representation? A creative gesture? A painted idea? A painted world? A painted painting? If it is the one, then it is also sometimes the other. Uncovering a lie in this labyrinth must simply mean finding an exit, fast, but then one is outside again [see p. 143]. To speak of lies where they are obvious becomes an act of truth (at least an act of perception). We perceive that we are taking part in the uncertain game of perception. Painting makes truths easier for us by clothing them in "transparent" lies. It uses lies which can express truths. By exposing its lies it reveals the truth of painting. It demands the return of what is already its own.

It is on this slippery surface that we confront the usual works we sometimes carelessly refer to as "pictures". A picture by Polke? What does that mean? We know of works by other painters which hermetically close themselves off from the world as if all they could do (or want to do) is demonstrate ART. By (temporarily) abstaining from this pathos, Polke brings forth new meaning. Derrida has reminded us of the wonderful old word *parergon* which derives from *ergon* (work) but is neither strictly speaking the work itself nor additional detail (*hors d'oeuvre*). According to him it "loosens all absolute values from their fixed positions without becoming indefinite." It is allowed to contain doubts which one day become certainties (e.g. lasting works) in which a side issue (attempt, experiment, parergon) is transformed into a central theme (work). Thus, like an open discourse, the parergon contains truths about painting concealed by the usual theoretical works.

So-called "classical Modernism" put itself in golden chains when it proclaimed the great truth of painting to distinguish it from pure illusion. When Cézanne wrote to Emile Bernard that he owed him "truth in painting" (the source for Derrida's title) he was speaking of the absolute truth in painting which he sought behind all representations. This was the arrival of ART. When Heidegger wrote his famous essay on art in 1935 he gave one chapter the title "Truth and Art". Although it contains a great deal about van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes, Heidegger was not interested in painting (which for him was lacking) but in ART (preferably poetry). In an admittedly dark period, he ceremoniously announced the appearance of a "being", which could only be revealed through truth in art.

When Derrida subjected these religious theses to his non-religious deconstruction, he not only retrieved the "appearance" [*Schein*] from behind the "reality" [*Sein*] but put painting back into play, a concrete medium when compared with ART. However, Derrida's "truth in painting" is now the untruthful truth ordinarily displayed by texts. Painting returns not as a revelation of a higher truth but as a performance and a painted word game. Derrida also speaks of "four truths in painting" as if to herald the "three lies of painting" referred to in a title by Polke [see p. 140]. In his words "One dreams of painting without truth" apart from its own, giving it the right to go on being painted without shame. The "simulacra" it can conjure up so well are united with the "complete seriousness of their literal nature" at the other end of the scale (in other words: painting, nothing but painting). To continue to paint today means to continue writing a text (playing a game) which is different from subjecting oneself to linear progress [see p. 143].

### *A Negative Theology*

It is not enough, however, to reduce painting to painting as if one knew everything about it. One would only commit a new error and explain a new ontology instead of ART. No, only when painting is questioned, when its obviousness and familiar surface are denied can one liberate the concept from too narrow an understanding. The

negation of painting is superficially like a lie which brings unknown truths about painting to light. But once again we are approaching a mental barrier. Classical modernist painting sometimes only achieved shining autonomy by forcefully driving the images out of its temple. It left the infected images of the world to other media, making any representation of this kind impossible. War was declared between painting and the images, the former a representative of art and the latter a protocol of the world. If the images return today it would seem as if painting had had to capitulate. In Polke's work, however, painting only makes a tactical retreat, freeing its own stage for the images and signs around us which it then recaptures for itself through avid deconstruction.

Such a strategy of concealing oneself and living behind a mask is like the old method of "negative theology" which strengthened its mysteries through negation, denying banality any self-assured form of discourse. How to speak about important things is a moral rather than a rhetorical problem. During late antiquity Dionysios disguised himself as a pupil of Paul the Apostle in order to modernize theology after the age of the great "fathers" under the protection of an ancient authority. He portrayed familiar truths in new pictures and rewrote them using dissimilar names. The irony of the Romantics was not that at all but a similarly negative theology to rescue the absolute under the protection of nothingness.

The legacy of a modern age in which painting was either absolute or taboo is today a refusal to choose at the crossroads between heaven and hell. Painting must neither end in a "holy surface" nor make way for other media when it no longer plays this role. Its presence was often only recognised in connection with this authorised surface bearing the signature of ART (even before it was able to demonstrate its own art as painting). If painting operates out of its absence, however, remaining a possibility, parody or vision, and withdraws unconcerned into its past while just as casually creating its future, it accrues the freedom which it has long made no use of. Then the horn of plenty which has always just been emptied can be refilled again. The absence of painting can make visible to us precisely what it is not and only appears to be: brushstrokes on canvas, a decoration of a framed area (decoration for thinkers), old-fashioned craftsmanship, a reproduction of reality. Such a method can be understood as *dissimulation*. Lodged in photography, advertising and decoration where one would have least expected it, painting has been lent unused powers which have not yet been exhausted in a new demonstration of autonomy. Thus, as G. Deleuze says of the work of art, it regains its voice from the hubbub again and again.

This form of dissimulation is far too serious to be confused with subversion or wit. In an early work the inscription under an abstract composition reads "Moderne Kunst" [Modern Art]. The obvious tautology itself proves to be a trap: we are referred back to our own cliché. Polke's titles sometimes appear to parody titles or advertise a product instead of explaining the work (which in the end is also a prod-

uct and a piece of merchandise). His treatment of images from the product world moves the game of hide-and-seek smoothly into a game of confusion between what we consider to be contrasting methods. *Reproduction* (the cliché) provides painting a hiding-place in which the painter secretly "goes to work"; *production* (the invention of the work) sometimes already begins with tenaciously undermining banal cliché images. When a painter intervenes in the pattern of curtain material (as if setting to work before a stage curtain), wallpaper and tablecloths, he is using a similar method of making us realise the boundary between original and cliché because it appears to blur.

This form of dissimulation makes use of further methods, only one of which shall be mentioned at this time. The appeal to magic is an ambiguous game of justifying the creative subject even in this clean-swept world of media and information. "The picture which was painted by command of higher beings" could be read on a cryptic installation by the young S. P. and has several meanings, including this one: painting rids itself of a meaning which is already dubious. The painter makes a blank statement, leaving nothing to be explained. The idea for the painting followed orders from above and the author is replaced by "higher beings" who take control, making use of a living medium. The absence of painting is perfected in the painter's parodic self-incapacitation when he declares he is only acting upon an inner voice (which afterall has always been a painter's inspiration).

*Laying on of Hands or Telekinesis*

The creative act appears suspect in the electronic age because we constantly look through our anonymous media spectacles and are slaves to the ideology of the objective image which we confuse with information. It is not only the painter's idea but also its execution which painting surrenders as a hand-crafted product in this great pose of freedom. If we allow a painting the aura of the "here and now", making it an unmistakable original, we experience once again the presence of a painter (an author "on his own authority") transferred onto the work. In the face of this undeniable act of painting, Polke serves up a double strategy of either exaggerating the personal gesture (in other words strengthening it threefold) or hiding it in a metaphor. The laying on of hands is one method and telekinesis is the other.

The *laying on of hands*, in which a power is transferred (magical or not) first began as a *handprint* on prehistoric walls where they left a trace, the trace of a presence. What could be more personal than a hand with its unmistakable lines? A hand controlled by the will of a living person leaving evidence of his presence on a dead surface? Polke uses this quote, and what was once a magical act provides him with a metaphor for the act of painting. The many hands on works like *Zwei "Steine" feiern Doppelhochzeit* [Two 'Stones' Celebrate a Double Wedding: see illus. 4] all belong to a single person and form a new kind of extended signature. The imperfect form of "faciebat" already lies in the series of repetitions, which is different from the perfect

form of “fecit” or an explicit completion of a work. Through the act of pressing, the many hands firmly fix the surface of the painting in the “here and now”, even if Polke usually does everything he can to deny this surface [see p. 137]. He has long seen the truth in the handprint which produces a lie. The moment we see the handprint in his work, the artist is no longer present. His work is only something of the future while he is designing it (pro-jecting it) and has long become the past when he “lets it out of his hands”, letting it live its own life.

At first glance, *telekinesis* and the laying on of hands are completely opposed. Telekinesis mystifies the transference of the idea into the work as a spiritualist conjuring. The artist’s hand alone cannot make something appear in the work. In an elegant turnabout, Polke alludes to the doubtful process of telepathy. Here a living medium makes something appear on a surface where nothing has been and nothing can actually be. This is pure imagination to some and fact to others. A painting of Polke’s which is often described shows a spreading splodge on a highly realistic furnishing fabric (as realistic as a table in levitation) which acts like a passing ghost, a phantom. One knows that this “flowing” mass was created by a stream of paint which Polke directed with the use of gravitation. But gravitation and levitation, which make up the magic act in telepathy, are wonderfully opposed, bringing yet another ironic metaphor to light. Who would not agree that an artist’s experience must contain a portion of superstition or belief in miracles? The explanation of art usually given by experts is not that far removed from scientific explanations of supersensible phenomena as once undertaken by parapsychology. The creative act requires a medium which cannot be discovered to be cheating. Can artists who create things which do not exist in this world be described any better?

1 *Tischerücken*, 1981.
Speck Collection, Cologne

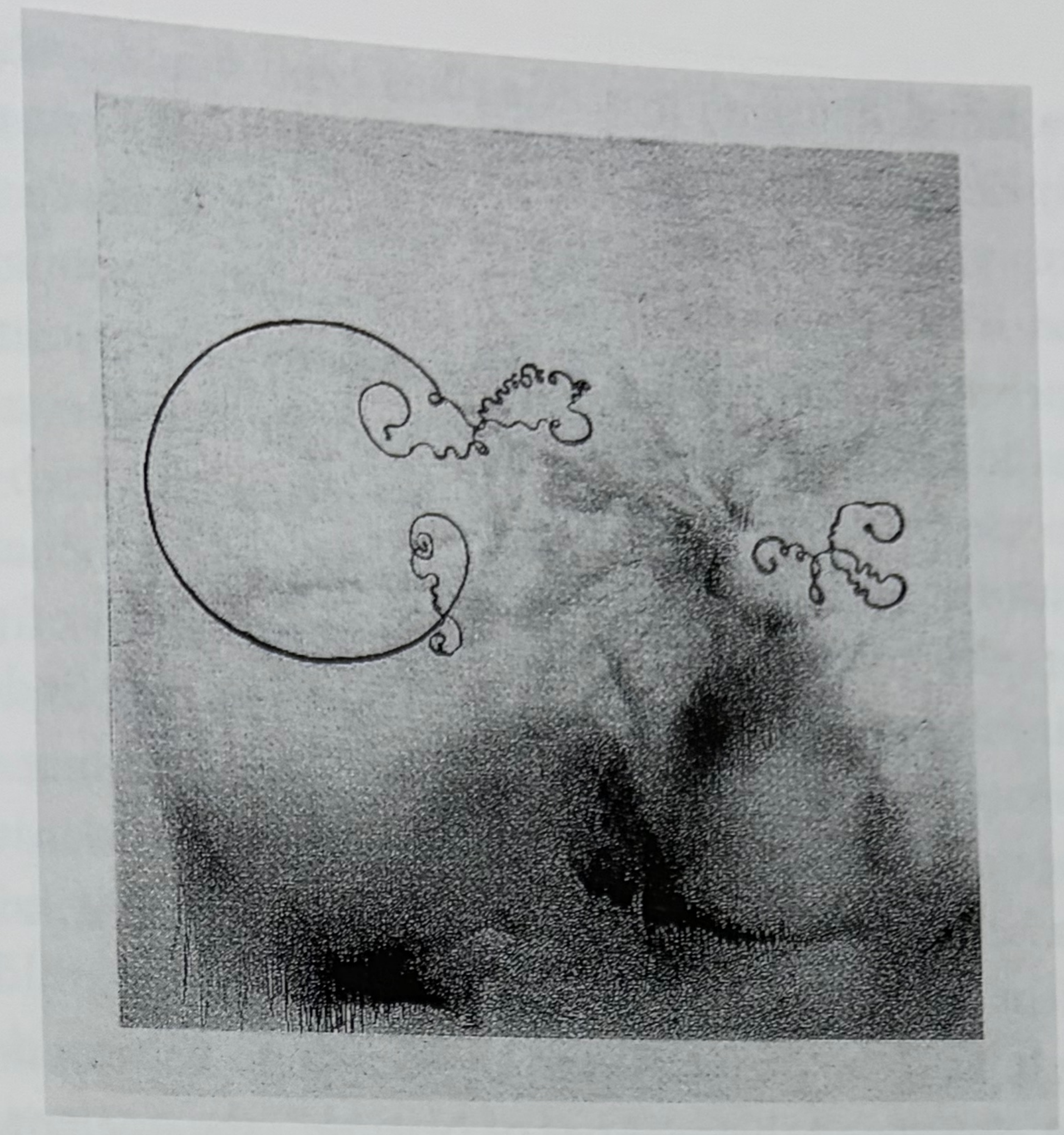
This description would be nothing but a parody, however, if the great role of the artist were still undisputed. As this is no longer so, the disguise of a magician is only a stage director's tool for acknowledging the role by giving it a different name. As soon as the artist wants to become the author of a work he must also want to become a subject which transfers its identity onto "his work". This is the Romantic artistic ego. His counterpart would be a birthing attendant who only intervenes in the event to ensure that it proceeds according to its own laws. This is artist as catalyst instead of creator and inventor. Polke does not allow us this antithesis. He holds up the mask of the obedient medium simply to play the role of the artist all the more undisturbed and conceal a confession in his denial.

The role of the artist can also be played as an ancient quote, a letter of manumission issued by the art historical tradition. This perhaps is the meaning of the "Dürerschleifen" [TR: "Schleifen" could be understood as the "handwriting" – thus signature – contained in the facture of the artist's work] which Polke transformed into "Polkeschleifen" in a virtuosic contest. If we remember, Dürer celebrated the "Schleifen" (signatures not of his name but of his hand in the act of drawing) as *parergon* [see p. 130] for a relief plate. Polke repeats the "Schleifen" in theatrical enlargement (on modern screens where they are suddenly all that remains) as a performance of his artistic "handwriting". The "Schleifen" are neither excellent reproduction nor original stroke. They are the signature of ART with which Polke appears as Dürer (redivivus) without copying him. He reworks Dürer as an artist who continues the course of art history. Legends of artists come back to life as already told by Pliny. According to him, two contemporaries compete for the finest stroke ever to issue from an artist's hand. Apelles and Protogenes immortalise themselves in one and the same painting which, on account of their strokes, becomes "more famous than any other work of art". As if newly drawn on one of Dürer's works, the gestures of the "Polkeschleifen" contain a story in themselves: the unending legend of art.

*Alchemy / Chemistry and Metamorphosis*

Painting would lose a crucial element if we were only to search for it in *art history*. Polke reminds us of the *natural history* of his materials which Pliny still demonstrated in painting. Some painters today view their responsibilities only in the realm of ideas and take their colouring substances straight from the tube, using them as a neutral element of the discourse material. In the technical age nature has also been banned as a motif in painting. Every recourse to nature appears as an archaic attitude. This is where Polke protests, reminding us in this forbidden way of forgotten wonders of painting which once caused astonishment in the way chemistry does today. Nature returns to painting not in a motif but in a spectacle of natural forces (and their counterpart in the form of synthetic chemicals).

The idea of metamorphosis gains broader meaning within this framework. We know that metamorphosis is a *change of form* without which there can be no



erschleifen (Amerikanische
n), 1991. Private collection

painted picture. But the "transformation" which is part of the concept already takes place in the paint, lacquer and resin which Polke consequently makes his subject. This transformation of materials is a temporal process which leaves traces in the painted picture of the history of its creation. The picture appears to draw itself. The painter releases forces like those in a photographer's developing bath. Polke's paintings are also created again and again out of a kind of development bath in which the painter triggers anonymous reactions as if he has withdrawn from the work process. The impulsiveness of the painted gestures to which we are accustomed is reflected in the spontaneity of chemical processes. The painting thus becomes an experimental field on which not only new forms but also new substances arise. In the splotches, drops and flows of colour we can read images which represent a visual (and chemical) event – an elemental drama.

The term which presents itself to describe this strategy of painting is not *chemistry* but *alchemy*. In the Modern age, empirical chemistry replaced the dark practice of alchemy which was (as it famously described itself) a "divine, holy art" comprehensible to only a few initiates. Once again we come across a cryptic archaism offering us, however, the most modern description of that which we call art. This was also how alchemy distinguished itself from chemistry, considering itself to be art thus protecting the mystery of the world. Alchemy was art, not only as an ancient ritual of skilfulness but also a symbolic act instructed, as it were, by hieroglyphs. Again, Polke makes use of a role-play which has the appearance of a lie but within the lie is concealed an ancient myth which we, in our understanding of art, unconsciously keep alive. The aesthetic interplay with the elements bears within it the useless yet so obvious freedom to which art is entitled.

The analogy between alchemy and painting has been made since ancient times. Pliny speaks wistfully of the forgotten four basic colours in ancient painting which, in different order, represented the four phases of the alchemist's process: black, white, yellow and red. The colours (reduced to three in post-antique alchemy) were each symbolic of a precisely prescribed procedure of the mysterious "work", consisting of experimentation with chemical forces. "Work" not in the sense of "result" but rather as a process and reflection of the cosmogony which the alchemist repeated in his laboratory. Hidden in the analogy with ancient alchemy lies a wonderful treasury of metaphors for describing the polymorphous art of painting. What could characterise this better than *Theatrum Chemicum,* the title under which a collection of alchemist writings was published in 1602? The ennobling of materials in the chemical "marriage of the elements" is cryptically akin to the transformation of pigments in art. As a secret art, alchemy was always accused of being fraudulent which is why the ancient secret text, the "Smaragdene Tafel" (Emerald Script) claims already in its opening lines to be "true without lies". Dante banished the alchemists to a swindler's hell but christened them "Apes of Nature", the ancient name given to painters. (*Inferno* 29.139)

Polke's dramaturgy sometimes extends beyond the actual process of painting when he chooses paints which later undergo a change on exposure to light, warmth or humidity. The "chemical theatre" of substances passes through a second act after the artist lays down his brush. The hydrosensitive or thermosensitive paints contain forces which first come to light at the place the painting is exhibited. By "reacting" (to use a chemical expression) in the absence of the painter, the paintings present themselves as an event (appearance) and painting as an art of metamorphosis. The interaction between the painter and the "spirits he conjures up" is by no means out of control. After all, artists were practising chaos theory long before science began bragging about its achievements. The interaction takes a variety of forms which only develop over a period of years when the painter blows metal dust, (meteor dust, in fact) into the artificial resin or creates granulations with iodine or silver nitrate. Sometimes the chemical processes contract into streaks and the patterns of lines which appear when varnish ages and cracks, creating pseudo-decorative patterns. Sometimes they explode so violently they destroy any kind of pattern, replacing form with drama. This dynamism suggests a new strategy of painterly "abstraction". One could also call it a painted philosophy of nature. "Die Geister, die Kraft verleihen, sind unsichtbar" [The Spirits that Lend Strength are Invisible] is the ambiguous title of five larger paintings from 1988 which introduce this myth of painting like a compendium.

The painting subject remains in the background as a director. But who is acting in the foreground of Polke's stage? The colours and substances give the impression of being independent, of releasing themselves from the solid canvas which they normally cover with a second skin. The painting surface is soaked with resin to such a

degree that it dissolves – into a window of light. Bilateral pictures are created, painted front and back, and positive and negative forms polyphonically interlock. We need not turn them over as was required of the double-sided paintings of old. The new transparency lends them the simultaneous look of a picture puzzle. The lie in this dramatic production, namely the impression that we can look straight through the canvas as if it were not there, brings to light an otherwise impossible truth about the paint. Instead of melting indissolubly with the opaque surface into a "wall of painting" (Balzac) the paints get their own bodies back as if by magic from the bodiless canvas. They seem to float as they catch our eye in the middle of such a window (one could also call it a screen). A spectacle of painting is being directed, reminding us once again of the old competition with the spectacle of alchemy – that forgotten art which Polke renewed in the name of painting to bring the proximity of art and magic back from forgottenness.

### *Representation: The Disturbed Raster*[1]

Just as painting substances belong to the gestures of painting, halftone dots in printing (like pixels in electronics) are essential to technical images as reproductions of the world.

The sharp dualism between personal painting and the fixed cliché image prevents painting from once again becoming "representational" in a naive sense, even if it appears to represent things. Its models are not the things themselves but their mechanical representations which it playfully uses and then analyses. In painting, a subject is at work who not only performs the old gestures of painting but comments on the new technological models (acting as a subject despite the disguise).

The technical images contain the very same anonymity which is laid out in mechanical production and the intention of mass distribution. They are not only reproductions of a motif but copies of clichés characteristic of a particular medium. Whether ancient woodcuts, old illustrated broadsheets, old-fashioned comics or ageing newspaper photographs, they were all templates for a reproduction technique only current for a short time. Polke reminds us of their historical faces which once looked timeless but appear so out-dated today that we would not trust them with any information. Once a medium of information, they have become, for the most part, a medium of memory. In the Gutenberg age the reproduction of images on paper formed our perception of the world just as other media increasingly do today. Contrasted with an original work, such images (which were always illusions) presupposed a different reality (that of the world) which they duplicated in the form of information. When taking a closer look, however, they prove to be transitory cobwebs, easily torn by a breath of wind from the next invention. The contrast to painting is dramatised when Polke draws print raster by hand, introducing them as foreign bodies into the painting. This is a meaningless act and for that very reason liberates a hidden meaning. A reproduced reproduction turns against its own meaning.

1 Translator's note: The term raster in English is a purely technical term to describe a scanning field in television, a matrix or grid in cinematography, photography and printing. In German the term is much broader in both everyday and individual use. In short, a raster can serve as a systematised framework for virtually anything.

Its capitulation is all the more final when the painter transforms it back into original painting which not even he can reproduce precisely. The images in question are representative not only of media of reproduction but of media of perception. They have a double connection to all that which they reproduce as well as a connection to those who perceive them. This connection is sometimes described in the structure of representation. The banal facts are anything but clear. What we see on TV or in magazines is constructed on a raster which gives the illusion of actually containing what we want to see. But the raster is empty, something which Polke makes us conscious of when he analyses the raster itself. The more he resolves it, the faster we are led to the zero point in the raster which is not a point at all but begins where all points end. Beforehand, however, the printer's ink engages in battle with the light which penetrates the raster and undermines it, having no raster itself. In the painting *Interieur* everything we see *inside* comes in a paradoxical truth from *outside*, from the light which the furniture represented in the room made visible as a negative. Polkes's ritual of projecting real transparencies of prints and xerox copies onto unfinished paintings in order to translate their dead raster into living painting is an allegory of the theatre of illusions controlling our perceptions. We translate blind surfaces into visible matter without any trouble.

However, the lesson on the raster through which we receive the images of the world is not yet over. Regardless of whether or not it is made up of dots, the raster is actually nothing more than a pretty pattern. It shares this characteristic with frost patterns on the window, cracks and lines in the varnish of a painting and the weave of linen cloth. As soon as we see the pattern, we can see nothing else. It is the holes in the pattern which cause anarchy to break out among the order (those are not holes between the dots but holes where dots should be) setting in motion what we call representation. Representation is the disturbance in the pattern which we fill with meaning. That which is representational is an illusion of perception which fills the holes in the pattern. We believe that we can look through the raster as if that which we see lies behind it. The lie in the raster is the truth in perception. Plato was too quick in condemning the Sophists, considering how dependent appearance and reality are on one another. The disturbance in the pattern is animated by our representational-spatial way of seeing in a manner that is not so far removed from magic (or shall we call it auto-suggestion). In the end, animation is the requirement for perception.

Polke barely calls to mind this connection in order to teach us a lesson on the theory of perception, but rather gains two trump cards from this strategy, allowing him as a painter to cross the minefield of lies and truths unharmed. The first trump card is the ability to distinguish between painting and the representations of the world in such a way that we avoid confusing them (yet enjoy this possibility). In the second, following upon the first, the artist is allowed to manipulate what we ourselves manipulate through our perception. The artist is once again at work, making us aware of a game in which we are participants. Making us aware – which means

3 *Interieur,* 1965.
Collection of Frieder Burda

tempting us with his gestures to perceive our own way of seeing. He presents representation in such a way that we enjoy it as a spectacle in which illusion and truth lie close together. Being disillusioned leads to admitting to the miracle that we see something where there is nothing. In its lies, painting contains a hidden truth about the miracle of seeing.

### Contemplation of Two Works:
### *A. The Double Wedding of the Images*

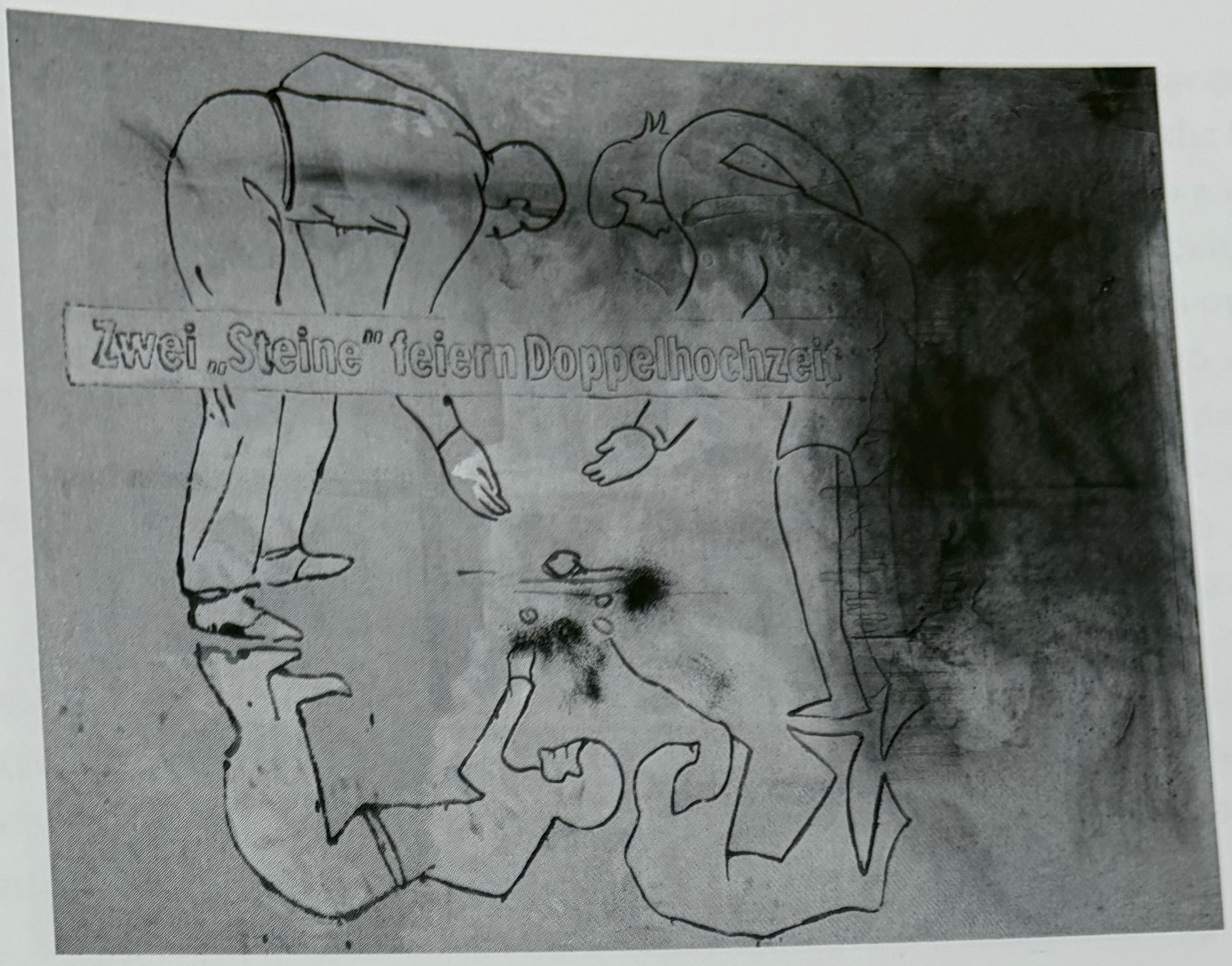
In a painting from 1983 a couple bends over its reflection as if wanting to duplicate Narcissus. A large bar of text lying across the painting literally says that a double wedding is being celebrated. But who is getting married, and to whom? Text and picture mutually refute each other when we read that two stones are celebrating a double wedding, two stones in quotation marks. There are two stones in the picture, but they function as a tool, not as the subject. In sticking to the text we are tempted to make profound associations with alchemist terms. It would seem reasonable to consider the marriage of the elements which was arranged in order to find the mysterious material dubbed the "Philospher's stone". Next to the painted stones, splotches containing granulating silver nitrate demonstratively spread out, undergoing a metamorphosis as a material. Similar to many sketches from that period which were never utilised, the line of text in a small sketch of the painting is made up of words or letters from newspaper headlines. In the papers the title announces a text which is replaced here by the image in the painting. There such a headline would usually tempt us to read the accompanying text. Here it tempts us with a wordplay, leading us to believe it is the solution to the riddle posed by the picture. It is not

about stones but about so-called "stones" which suggests shortening *Stein* [stone] to *Sein* [TR: being, reality] and again to *Eine* [one] which here unites that which was separate. This brings us back by another route to the very same metamorphosis hidden in the alchemist's "work".
Leaving the text, appearances tell us, however, that we are dealing with the nature of an image, in other words, that one *cannot* unite with images. The couple, turned toward their images rather than each other are separated by a reflecting surface which is both water and ice (and at the same time neither one). If it were water, the couple would not be able to stand on it. If it were ice, their reflections would be obscured. However one might explain the distance, it is never bridged by the reflection. Then there are the stones. The couple throw them toward their likenesses as if trying to bridge the elemental distance preserved by the picture, but the stones would destroy the image in water and shatter the glass in a mirror. We are reminded of a metaphor which Duchamp once expressed very differently in *The Large Glass*: the bachelors will never marry the bride.

No marriage takes place in Polke's painting either. It would not even be possible for a couple made of flesh and blood bending over their reflection. How much smaller the chance for a couple which only exist as an image and can perhaps double themselves but not reflect themselves and certainly not unite. The game continues, however, for we are still there. We are aware that we exist outside the painting but in gazing upon it we are doing almost the same as the couple. The mirror in the picture over which the couple bends and the painted surface before which we stand almost form a right angle in a telling way. We also grow accustomed to our perspective when we stand in front of this painting for the purpose of seeing something. Now the riddle of the double wedding suddenly seizes possession of the entire work. This can only either be work and object or it reflects us as images of our perception (if not of our appearance) as if from a mirror. The work is either a lie, hung on the wall like an object, or a narrative through which we forget that we are standing before a lifeless canvas – an object. The contradiction unable to be resolved begins with our gaze. This is why Polke has stage directions ready to intensify the contradiction. On the left side we are shown a solid painting surface on which Polke has made numerous imprints with his hand. On the right side, the use of varnish has turned the surface into a mirror which casts back our reflection. Let us remember that when we stand in front of a real mirror we see either only glass or our image in a place we cannot be. In both cases we are dealing with an impenetrable surface which only receives our gaze in the images created on it whereby the images that we ourselves see and those that arise there form a mysterious pair.

### *B. Three Times One: The Lies of Painting*

In one of Polke's works there is mention of "the three lies of painting". We are well aware that there are many more lies in painting but this number awakens our curios-

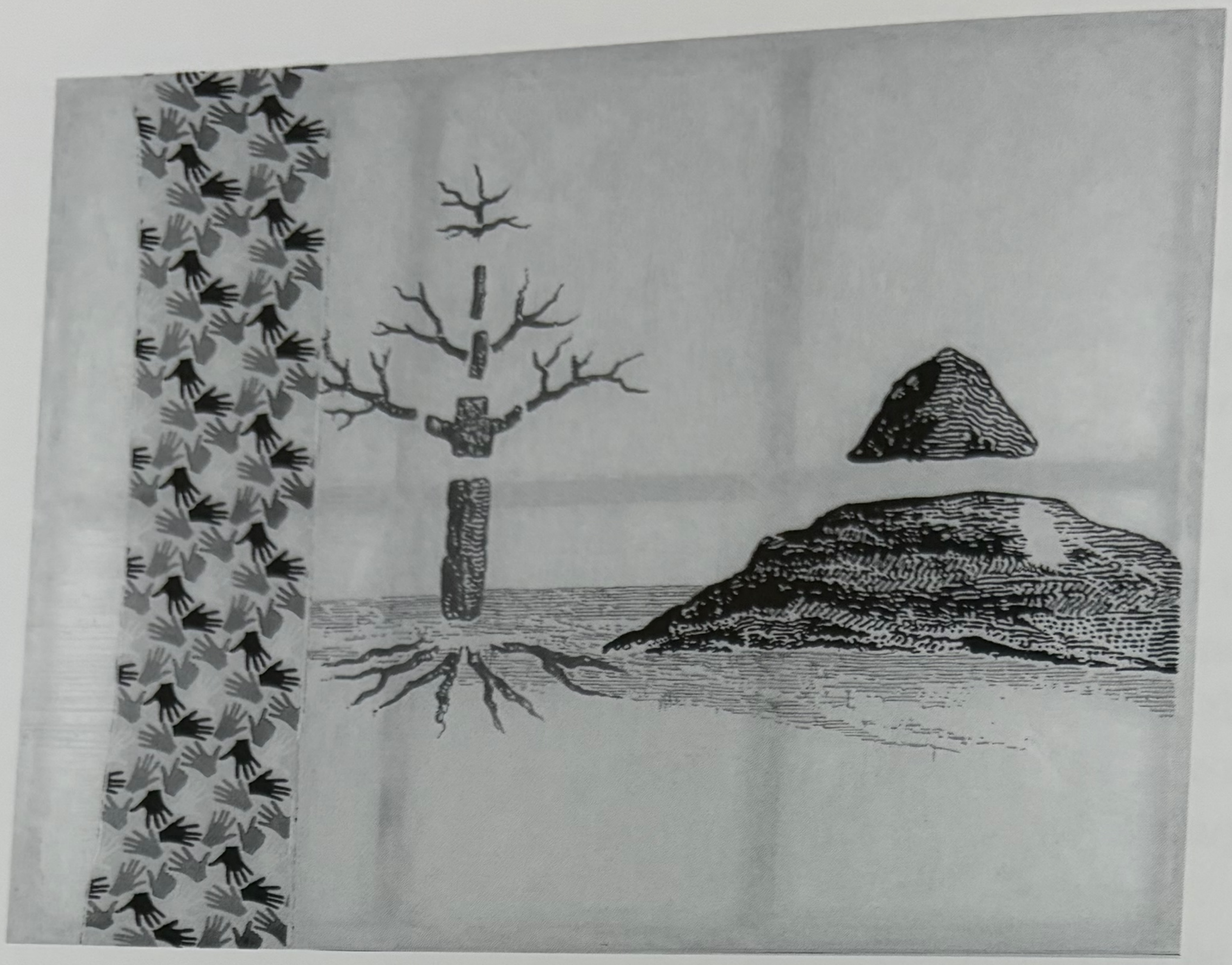



4 *Zwei "Steine" feiern Doppelhochzeit*, 1984. Collection of Frieder Burda

ity. We want to know which three lies are meant. Where a riddle is presented we will seek a solution. The picture has already wrapped itself in the lie of "three times one". Three fabric surfaces are sewn together to make up not three pictures but one. Three times one therefore is not three – but one: a single work with a single title. The division into three is repeated in the canvas stretcher on the transparent back, but now in shifted intervals. Which of the two bodies is the picture surface, the stretcher or the canvas? Both sides of the work's structure lie to each other. The three lies of painting only begin where something has been painted or *appears* to have been painted. Where the hands appear imprinted on the picture we are not dealing with handwork but with a printed fabric, a *ready-made*. This length of material forms the only unified surface while to the left and right, a different material with a faded parquet design has lost its hard surface from the usual chemical treatment. Personal intervention begins with such technical details which do not precede the act of painting as is usually the case but actively introduce it. The technical aspect expands beyond the painting to become a comprehensive production of the picture surface. Even the seams between the fabrics have a voice in the effect of the picture. They create strong waves on both sides of the transparent fabric, catching the light like waves on the surface of the water.

5 *Zwei "Steine" feiern Doppelhochzeit* from *Skizzenbuch, rot-orange*, 1972/73. Private collection

Does the *com-position* (in Latin a "putting together" of parts) already belong to the three lies of painting? Is this also the case with the *per-spective* which forces us to literally "look through" into emptiness? Is the *pattern* of hands finally a game of illusion since it is a printed fabric (instead of the imprint of hands) which lets us believe we see hands? We cannot yet be satisfied with such a solution, however, because it excludes the painted motifs. Here the riddle begins anew. The tree and



6 *Die drei Lügen der Malerei*, 1994. Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne and New York

mountain, symbols of nature, are not representations but abstract signs. As if originating from a historical sign alphabet for deaf mutes, they refer to a genus or type instead of representing an individual tree (or mountain). The tree is spelled out, as it were, into picture syllables of root, trunk, multiple branches and crown. It is not only broken down into its elements but into its phases of growth, nourishing itself from the water in the earth before it can rise into the air.

The riddle continues. The tree and the mountain reproduce setting copies which usually give the impression of seeing objective images. But here, contrary to first appearances, they have been painted (copied) by hand and exposed to the subjective gesture of painting. Whereas the fabric pattern which seemed to be painted turns out to be a print, the rest, which appears printed, shows itself to be painting. This is confusing enough, but the confusion reaches a peak when the lines of the print raster flow away since they consist of the paint applied by the painter's brush. The metamorphosis is completed, as it were, before our eyes. Painting and print, the symbols of production and reproduction can only appear as lies in the medium of the other. But our concern is with painting. Reproduction and free gesture lose their safe mutual boundary. Today, the original brushstroke can only consist of repetition, endless repetition without fear of repetition and without the pressure of being unique.

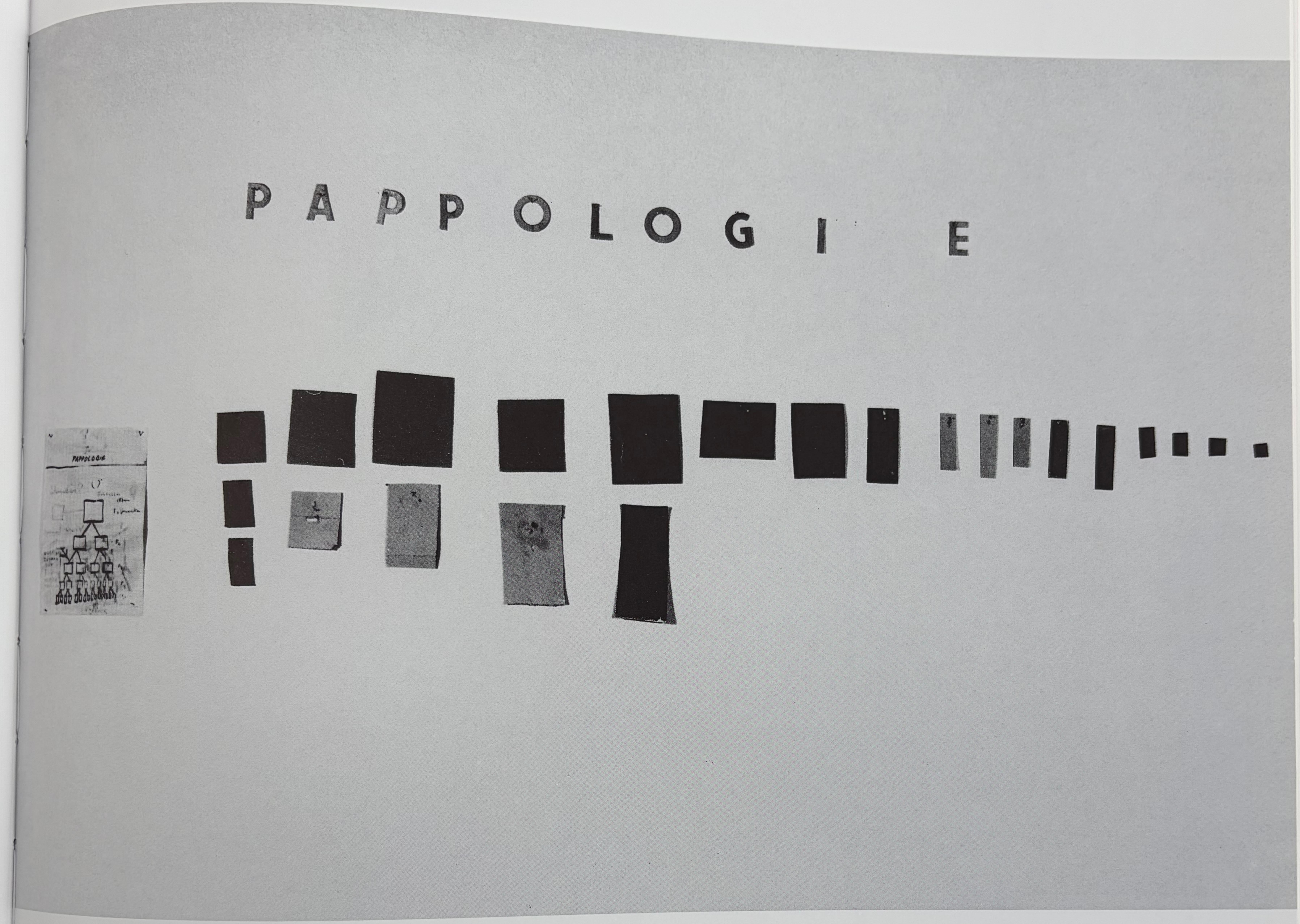
*Epilogue*

As plausible as this view may appear, it contradicts the modern age programme of practising painting as representation, as representation of ART or an absolute form bound to a general truth. Lies were just as outlawed as all traps of illusion. A work

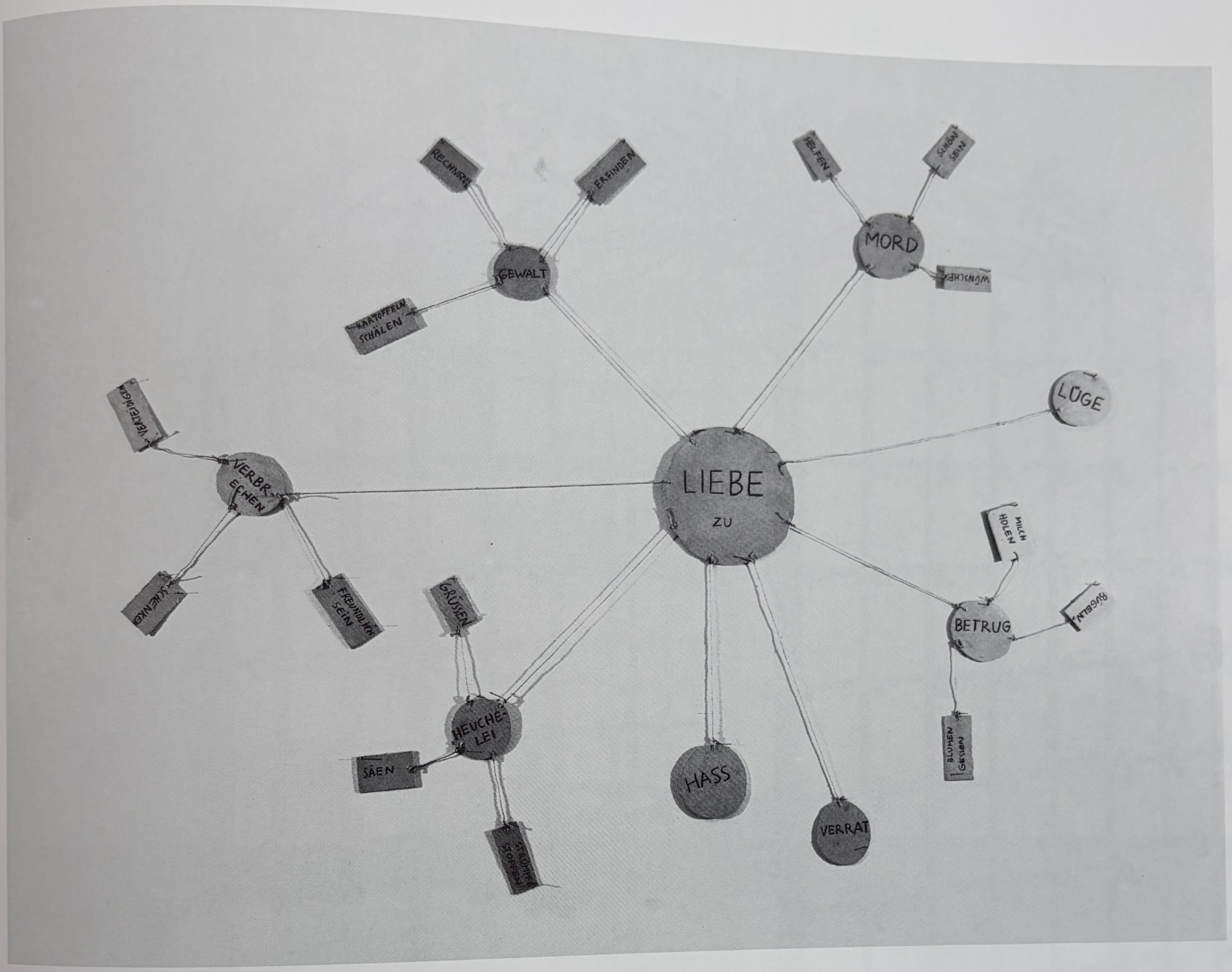
(the painter's part) also demanded clarity in interpretation (our part). It promised Ariadne's linear thread with which to differentiate between truth and lies in the labyrinth of possibilities. However, this "thread is broken" as Foucault wrote in a study on the subject and philosophy in 1969. Theseus needs no victory and no exit anymore. Endless discoveries in the labyrinthine spaces of a new freedom have opened up for him. What Foucault said about a new philosophy can be applied to a new painting if we exchange the terms in order to quote him. "The history of painting must be written anew." "Painting" now arises "as theatre once again. Not as a reflection upon theatre but as painting which itself has become a stage with people and signs." A stage with persons who are quotations and with underhand signs.

Although Polke continues his game which goes overboard according to the rules of representation, the game makes them lose their old demand for earnestness. Thus what Foucault said of philosophy is true for painting: "It is the end of representational painting. *Incipit pictura differentiae.*"

From the German by James Rumball

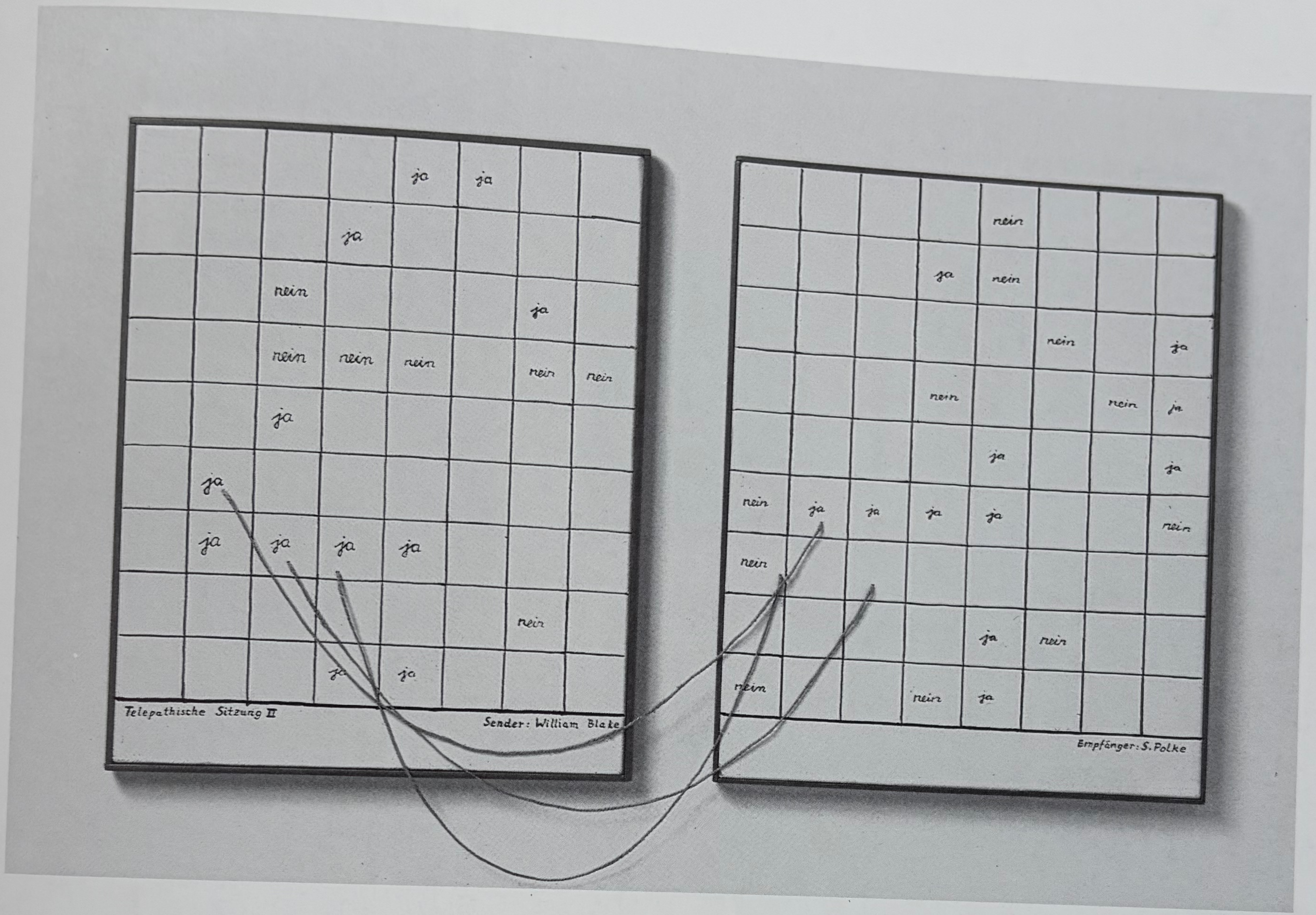



Pappologie 1968



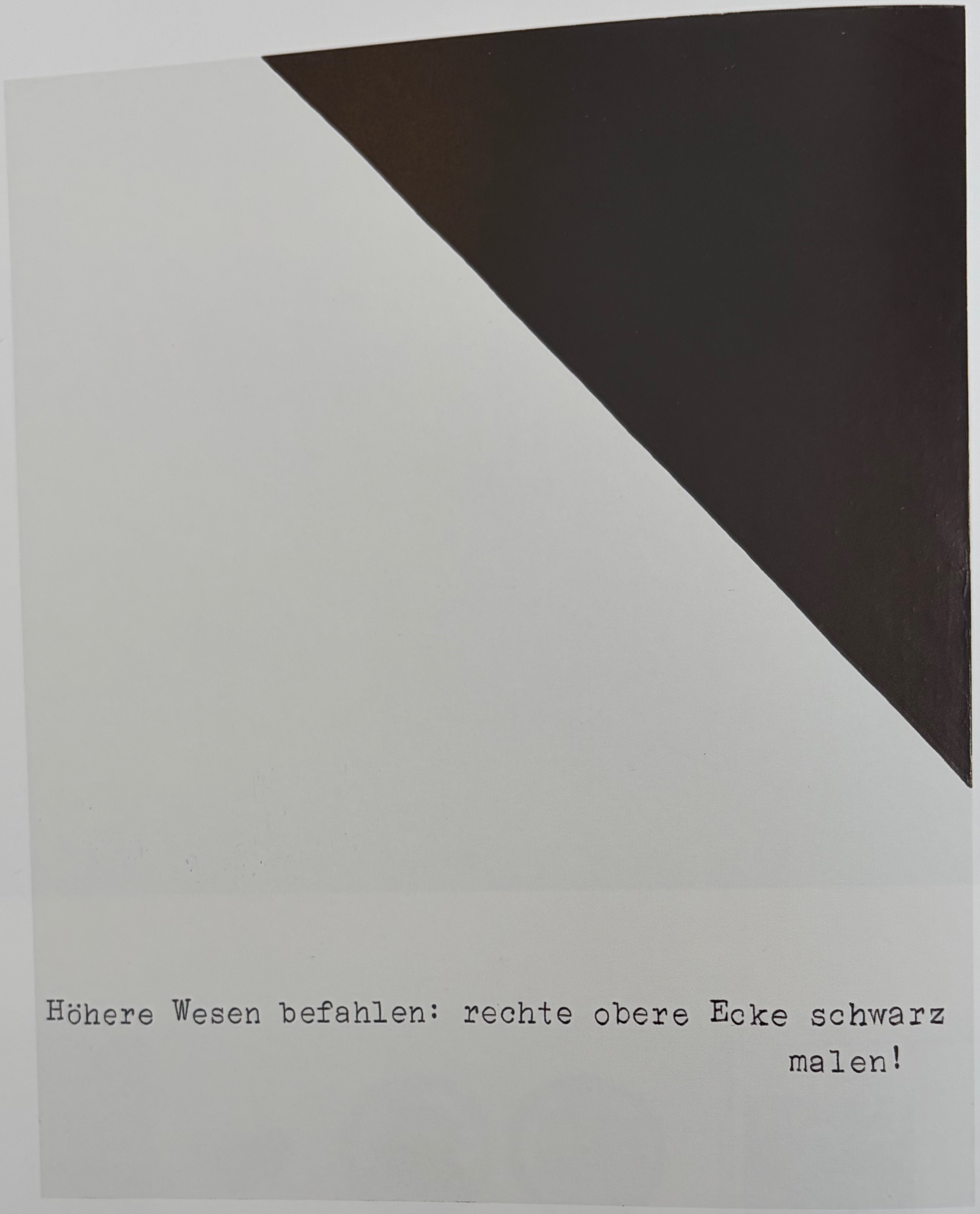

Liebe zu ... 1968

left: Langeweileschleife 1969




Telepathische Sitzung II (William Blake – Sigmar Polke) 1968

left: Wiederbelebungsversuch an Bambusstangen 1968






Höhere Wesen befahlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen! 1969

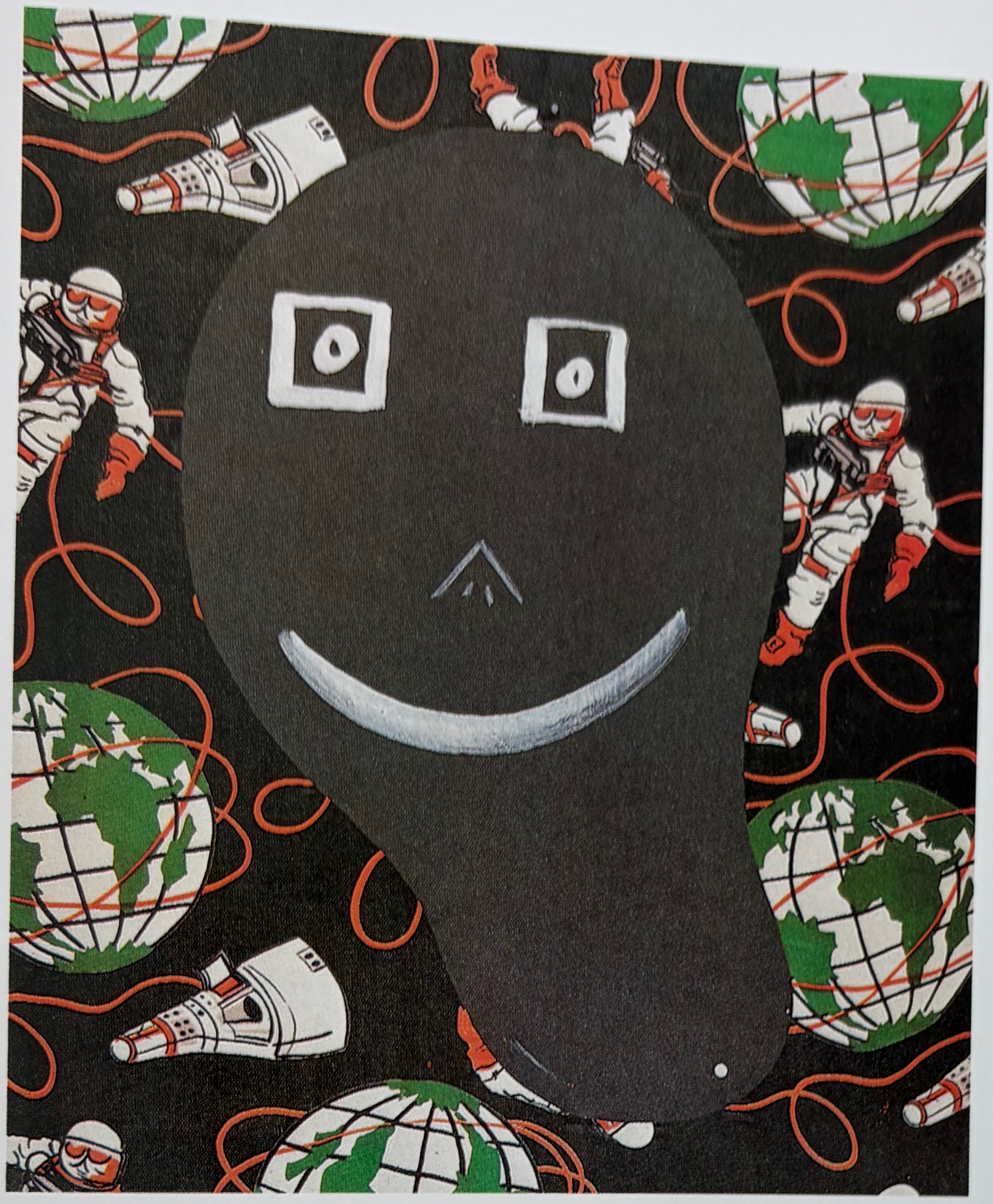
Carl Andre in Delft 1968

Handlinien 1968

A-Tell-Bild 1969

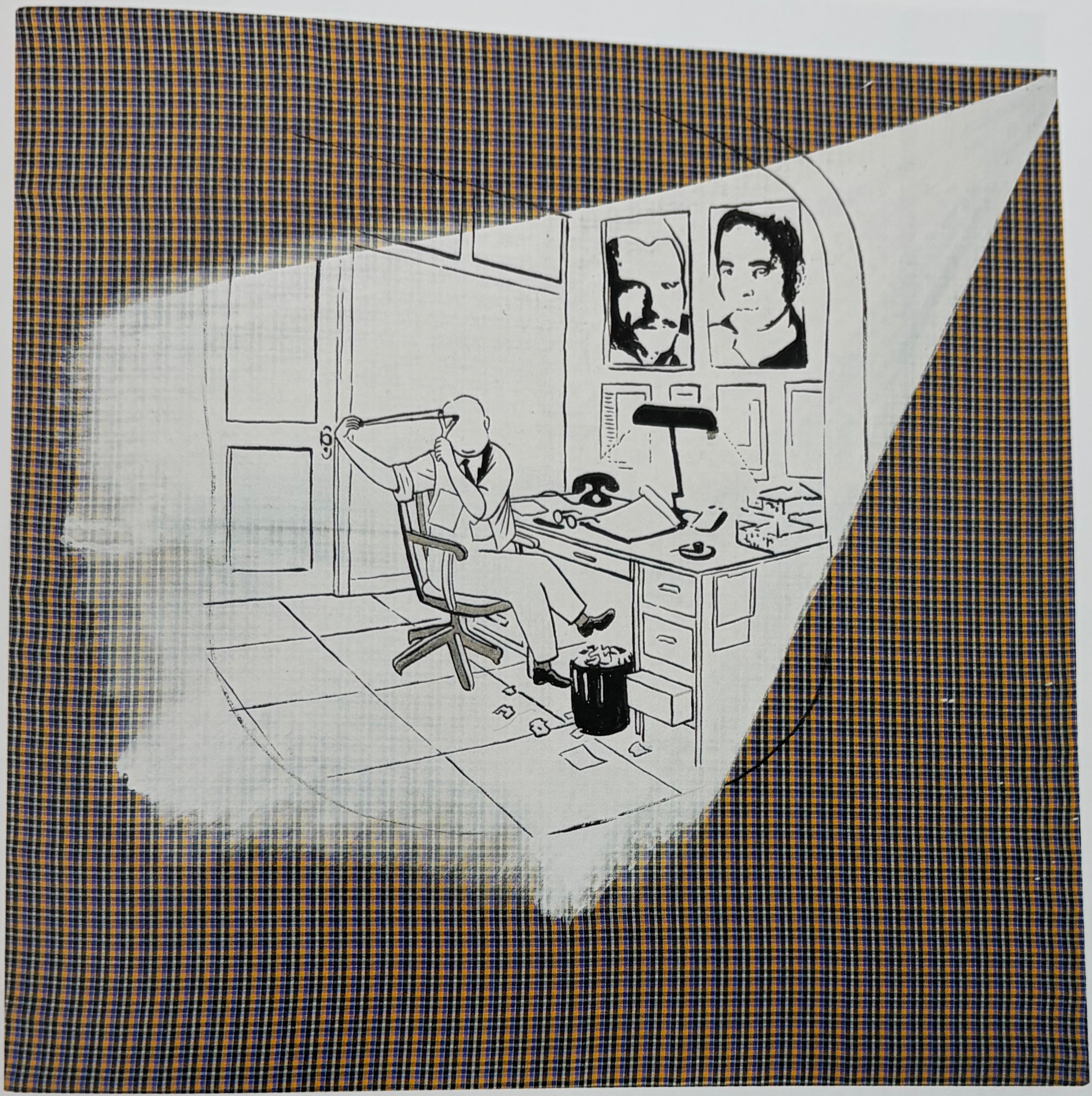
Parfümbild 1969/71

Aurora 1971



Polke als Astronaut 1968

Art Deco 1974



Dr. Bonn 1978

CHARLES W. HAXTHAUSEN

# The Work of Art in the Age of its (Al)Chemical Transmutability: Rethinking Painting and Photography after Polke[1]

*Pictures are meaningful to us only when by means of them reality is destroyed and newly generated. Pictures are therefore tools for intensifying crisis. They should not represent but be … Pictures are living beings, provisional fragments; we don't care a rap for immortality; death, this vital force, should not be denied with aestheticisms.*
Carl Einstein

At the conclusion of an essay on contemporary sculpture, Rosalind Krauss offered in passing a brief but provocative comment about contemporary painting: postmodernist practice, she wrote, "is no longer organised around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material. … It is organised instead through a universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation". If postmodern sculpture revolved around the oppositional pair architecture/landscape, then painting, she suggested, "would probably turn on the opposition uniqueness/reproducibility".[2] This latter opposition was of course the subject of Walter Benjamin's now classic essay of 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility", and it is above all this text that has shaped the contemporary critical discourse on this issue.[3] Nearly thirty years ago Benjamin's friend Theodor W. Adorno, editor of the first collection of his works, complained of the drastic simplifications of this essay, to which he attributed its "obtrusive popularity" – a popularity at that time still largely limited to the German-speaking world and, within it, to the discourses of literary theory and cultural criticism.[4] By the time Krauss published her essay a decade later, however, Benjamin's essay was well on the way toward becoming one of the seminal texts of postmodern art criticism.

By now, Benjamin's text has become all too familiar to many readers; because it is important for what follows, I shall briefly summarise it here. Benjamin was concerned with examining the new techniques of reproduction, primarily photography and film, and their consequences for traditional art forms and the contemporary reception of them; above all, he sought to theorise the political ramifications of those changes. As a result of the photograph, Benjamin argued, the authority of the original work of art had been undermined by its reproductive

1 The present text is a revised, expanded version of an essay with the same title that initially appeared in: *Photographie in der deutschen Gegenwartskunst*. Gesellschaft für Moderne Kunst am Museum Ludwig (ed.). Stuttgart 1993.
2 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field". In: Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend 1983, p. 41. The essay was originally published in *October* 8 (Summer 1979).
3 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In: Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*. New York 1968, pp. 217–251. I have altered the title by which Benjamin's essay is known in English translation to correspond literally to the original German title, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." As will become clear in the course of the present essay, the distinction between "reproduction" and "reproducibility" is not an insignificant one.
4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Len-

multiplication; its "aura" was in decay. "Aura" was Benjamin's metaphoric term for the "here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in space and time", which included the changes in its physical condition as well as its provenance.[5] The work of art, originally grounded in religious ritual, had since the Renaissance increasingly become the object of a purely secular ritual, that of aesthetic contemplation, which with the decline of the bourgeoisie had become "a school for asocial behaviour".[6] With the advent of modern photographic reproduction, however, the work of art became emancipated from this "parasitical dependence on ritual" and from its embeddedness in tradition.[7] Through its multiplication it became more accessible, and was thereby reactivated as a socially useful object that could assume new meanings and uses in new contexts. As a consequence of this revolutionary development, Benjamin argued, artists had begun creating works designed from the outset for reproducibility.[8] As an example of the resultant change in artistic production, Benjamin cited the collages and assemblages of the German Dadaists. Constructed out of mechanically reproduced elements, these works achieved a "relentless destruction of aura", which made them useless as objects of the kind of aesthetic contemplation possible before a painting.[9] In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin clearly regarded the cultivation of the auratic as a socially regressive cultural value. He suggested that it was linked with "outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery", which were susceptible to appropriation by fascism.[10]

Although published in the mid-thirties, the "Work of Art" essay remained largely without resonance until the 1960s, when Benjamin's work was rediscovered and adapted by the German left during the political awakening associated with the student movement. The text had earlier been reprinted in the two-volume selection of Benjamin's writings edited by Theodor W. and Gretel Adorno in 1955, and in 1963 became readily available, along with the earlier "Short History of Photography", in a paperback edition which bore its title.[11] But not until the 1970s did the essay begin to have an impact on art criticism, by which time it had also become readily accessible in English translation in a selection of Benjamin's writings edited by Hannah Arendt.[12] And within a decade, as it was appropriated by the proliferating discourse on the 'postmodern', Benjamin's text achieved a canonical status as a veritable prophecy of postmodern artistic practice.[13]

Initially, Benjamin's thesis proved to lend itself especially well to retrospective assessments of the Pop Art of the early to mid-sixties, in which both mass media imagery and reproduction techniques had played a central role. One of the earliest such applications of Benjamin was Rainer Crone's monograph on Andy Warhol, published in both German and English in 1970. Warhol's use of the reproductive silkscreen technique, declared Crone, amounted to a practical realisation of the theory Benjamin had formulated in his 1936 essay. "For Warhol

hardt. London 1984, p. 82. On the reception of Benjamin, including the "Work of Art" essay, see Klaus Garber, *Rezeption und Rettung. Drei Studien zu Walter Benjamin.* Tübingen 1987, pp. 121–193; and Michael Rumpf, "Walter Benjamins Nachleben". In: *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft* 52 (1978), pp. 137–153.

5 Benjamin 1969; see n. 3, p. 220. I have slightly altered the translation. The German text reads: "Das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks – sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befindet." The word "einmalig", literally, occurring only one time, conveys the sense of temporal as well as spatial uniqueness.

6 Ibid., pp. 224, 238.

7 Ibid. pp. 223–224.

8 Ibid., pp. 224.

9 Ibid., pp. 237–238. In other texts, both before and after the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin seemed to lament the ostensible decay of aura. See, for example, "The Storyteller," which he completed immediately after the "Work of Art" essay: Ibid., pp. 83–109. And in a text of 1931, "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin described his own relationship to the books in his possession in terms that can only be characterized as auratic. Ibid., pp. 59–68.

10 Ibid., p. 218.

11 Theodor W. Adorno and Gretel Adorno (eds.), *Walter Benjamin, Schriften*, 2 vols. Frankfurt a. M. 1955; Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.* Frankfurt a. M. 1963.

12 See n. 3.

13 I note Andreas Huyssens's remark in an essay of 1984: "Given the ravenous eclecticism of postmodernism, it has recently become fashionable to include even Adorno and Benjamin into the canon of postmodernists *avant la lettre* – truly a case of the critical text writing itself without the interference of any historical con-

the easel picture is 'the work of art designed for reproducibility'", and this fact destroyed the centuries-old illusion of the autonomy of the work of art. Warhol's commercially successful art, Crone argued, had been misunderstood: reinterpreted in the light of Benjamin, as a destruction of aura and therefore as an assault on the regressive social values associated with it, it took on a critical, subversive significance.[14]

In the course of the 1970s, following the publication of the "Work of Art" essay in English translation, its impact became increasingly manifest in English and American art criticism.[15] Trenchant examples of this reception are several essays by the American critic Douglas Crimp, published between 1979 and 1981, in which he broadly applied Benjamin's thesis to the situation of contemporary art. The "depletion of the aura, the contestation of the uniqueness of the work of art, has been accelerated and intensified in the art of the past two decades", he wrote. "From the multiplication of silkscreened photographic images in the works of Rauschenberg and Warhol to the industrially manufactured, repetitively structured works of the minimal sculptors, everything in radical artistic practice seemed to conspire in that liquidation of traditional cultural values that Benjamin spoke of".[16] Citing Robert Rauschenberg's production of the early 1960s as an example, Crimp observed that with the artist's introduction of photographic images "it became less and less possible to think of his work as painting. It was instead a hybrid form of printing. Rauschenberg had moved from techniques of production (combines, assemblages) to techniques of reproduction (silkscreens, transfer drawings). And it is this move that requires us to think of Rauschenberg's art as postmodernist. Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with aura. The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. ... Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence are undermined".[17] Thus in Crimp's judgement did photography "begin to conspire with painting in its own destruction", and hence in that "decay of the aura" that Benjamin had predicted.[18]

Few artists have engaged themselves with the issues raised by Benjamin's thesis as insistently as Sigmar Polke. Since his discovery of American Pop Art while a student at the Düsseldorf Academy in the early 1960s, nearly all of Polke's artistic output has seemed energised by a dialectic between uniqueness and reproducibility; "confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition" have been characteristic of much of his artistic production from its beginnings. He has delighted in employing elements appropriated from both traditional and modern reproduction techniques. Moreover, he has since the late sixties been not merely active but prolific in photography, the reproductive medium par excellence. If all of this seems to give Polke impeccable postmodernist credentials, we should take a closer look, for in actuality his work has stood

sciousness whatsoever." Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern". In: id., *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington 1986, p. 211.

14 Rainer Crone, *Andy Warhol*, trans. John William Gabriel. London 1970, p. 10. For another early example see Andreas Huyssen, "The Cultural Politics of Pop," first published in *New German Critique* in 1975 and reprinted in Huyssen 1986; see n. 13, pp. 152–156.

15 Benjamin's text had earlier been translated by H. H. Gerth and Don Martindale and published under the title "The Work of Art in the Epoch of Mechanical Reproduction". In: *Studies on the Left* 1 (Winter 1960), pp. 28–46. However, its influence seems to have begun only after the publication of *Illuminations* in 1968. The earliest instance known to me of the influence of Benjamin's essay on Anglo-American art criticism is John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth 1972. He acknowledges the importance of Benjamin for his approach on p. 34.

16 Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism". In: *October* no. 15 (Winter 1980): pp. 95–96. See also, by the same author, "Pictures". In: *October* no. 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 67–86; and "The End of Painting". In: *October* no. 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 69–86.

17 Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins". In Foster 1983; see n. 2, p. 53. Crimp's essay was first published in *October* no. 13 (Summer 1980).

18 Ibid., p. 55 n. 18.

postmodernist orthodoxy on these issues on its head. As such, his *oeuvre* constitutes a trenchant and original contribution to this Benjaminian discourse, and a stimulus for a stringent critical reassessment of it. For, in effect, Polke has adapted reproduced images and techniques of reproduction to reaffirm the uniqueness, "the here and now" of the work of art and to render it fundamentally unreproducible.[19] At the same time, far from undertaking a rear-guard action on behalf of traditional artistic values, Polke has through his practice engaged in a radical rethinking. What is painting? What is photography? And what is their interrelationship? Working within a visual discourse, he has succeeded in reviving this 150-year old question with renewed urgency.

1.

*In the illustrated magazines the public sees the world*
*that the illustrated magazines prevent it from perceiving.*
Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography"

Polke is notorious for his elusiveness; his "inaccessibility is legendary".[20] Parody, irony, and nonsense are staples of his rare interviews and published texts. Despite this caveat, one text merits quotation with regard to his treatment of the reproduced image: although its voice is autobiographical, it was authored in the mid-seventies by Polke's close friend, Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, almost certainly with the artist's collaboration. It includes an amusing anecdote about Polke's childhood during the lean years after the war, when money and food were scarce: "The fact of my birth would be insignificant for my later creative activity had I not been afflicted from that moment on with poor eyesight. To be sure, it is not that pronounced; but precisely this nearsightedness opened up for me – and very early – access to that world of the dotscreen, which became so significant for my later work. Even today, among my most painful memories is how in the long winter evenings after the currency reform the large family gathered together excitedly over each fresh issue of the *Bäckerblume* [a magazine of the German's baker's association, distributed in neighborhood bakeries – CWH] and … gaped at what they called 'delicious rolls', 'seductive croissants', 'honest to goodness bread', etc.; but there, where their fingers were pointing, to the accompaniment of ecstatic cries, I saw only many tiny, lifeless, black dots! In despair, I pushed my way closer, only to be yelled at uncomprehendingly… ".[21]

Whether essentially true, exaggerated, or completely fabricated, this anecdote does have a specific relationship to one of Polke's early dotscreen paintings, *Berliner (Bäckerblume)* [Doughnuts (Bäckerblume): see p. 38], which was derived from an illustration in the magazine, as well as to the visual effect of the dotscreen pictures, or *Rasterbilder*, of the mid-sixties generally.[22] By blowing up the image to a large scale (160 x 125 cm) and exaggerating the graininess of the auto-

19 Others have pointed out contradictions between Benjamin's thesis and postmodern practice. In addition to Huyssen 1986 (see n. 13), see, for example: Jürgen Zänker, "Walter Benjamins Kunstwerk-Aufsatz im Lichte der Pop-Art – Dargestellt am Beispiel Roy Lichtensteins". In: *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 42 (1981), pp. 303–324; Carter Ratcliff, "The Work of Roy Lichtenstein in the Age of Walter Benjamin's and Jean Baudrillard's Popularity". In: *Art in America* (February 1989), pp. 110–122, 177; Sidney Tillim, *Photography Reproduction Production: The Work of art in the Age of Mechanical Representation. Richard Artschwager, Ellen Brooks, Joseph Nechvatal, Mark Tansey, Andy Warhol*, Bennington 1992. (Exhibition: Bennington College, Bennington 1992.)

20 Isabelle Graw, "Beziehungsmuster bei Sigmar Polke". In: *Texte zur Kunst* 3, no. 10 (June 1993), p. 84.

21 Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, "Sigmar Polke – frühe Einflüsse, späte Folgen oder: Wie kamen die Affen in mein Schaffen? und andere ikono-biographische Fragen". In: *Sigmar Polke. Bilder Tücher Objekte: Werkauswahl 1962–71*, Tübingen 1976, p. 127 (Exhibition: Kunsthalle Tübingen 1976.) The text is reprinted in the present volume.

22 Martin Hentschel has discovered and published the source for the image of the baker in the upper half of Polke's painting. In: id., *Die Ordnung des Heterogenen. Sigmar Polkes Werk bis 1986*. Diss., Bochum 1992, p. 162, fig. 125. For his thorough and illuminating discussion of Polke's *Rasterbilder*, see pp. 118–179 of this study.

type process, Polke achieved the effect recorded in the anecdote. Viewed even from a distance, the painted image retains this grainy effect, and the closer one moves toward it, the more elusive it becomes, ultimately dissolving beneath an abstract grid of dots. The reproductive medium itself is thereby gradually isolated from the object that it signifies, and ultimately thwarts our perception of it.

Remarkably, the currently most influential theoretical texts on photography have not distinguished between actual photographs and autotype reproductions of them. From the examples that Roland Barthes cited it is clear that much of the time he actually had the latter in mind even as he constructed a theory to fit the former; he acknowledged no semiotic difference between them.[23] The photograph, he wrote, transmits the "literal reality" of its referent, reduced in scale, "but at no time is this reduction a *transformation* (in the mathematical sense of the term). In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate. ... Certainly the image is not the reality itself but it is at least its perfect *analogon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph".[24] This may be true of actual photographs, but it is absolutely *not* true of autotype reproductions of them, which precisely do transform this analogical image into standardised units – and these digitised autotype, or dotscreen, reproductions are the medium in which we encounter most of the photographic images of our culture, including reproductions of works of art. Polke focused on just this transformation of the object through the reproductive process, something most of us filter out when we look at these images. If the photograph and its referent are, in Barthes's apt simile, like two laminated leaves that cannot be separated without destroying them both,[25] this is untrue of *reproductions* of photographs: Polke pries those leaves apart, until the object dissolves and only one layer, that of the signifying system itself, remains. It is, in the strictest sense, an act of deconstruction: the ostensible *analogon* is exposed, by enlargement and exaggeration, as a digital mirage and its rhetorical power is broken.[26]

But this is not all. As noted above, the viewing experience of this work reverses the normal experience of perception – the closer one moves toward the painting, the less one sees of the object. Polke's blown-up image is thus teasingly designed to frustrate the very desire that it arouses – this is most strikingly apparent, for many male viewers at least, in titillating erotic images such as *Bunnies* (illus. 1) or *Japanische Tänzerinnen* [Japanese Dancers]. But this effect of frustration is dependent upon the viewer's encounter with the work in a gallery or museum setting, in which one glimpses it as one enters the room and has one's voyeuristic curiosity thwarted as one moves closer in hopes of a kind of vicarious possession. Indeed, as the myriad dots separate themselves from the image they begin, in Polke's words, "to vibrate, to move in and out of focus", and call forth

23 This is especially true of his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard. New York 1981. Take, for example, the following passage: "I was glancing through an illustrated magazine. A photograph made me pause"(p. 23); elsewhere, Barthes has actual photographs in mind, as when he writes of looking at photographs of his mother shortly after her death (p. 63). In an earlier theoretical essay, Barthes has a section on the newspaper photograph, but here also he makes no semiotic distinction. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Image". In: *Image – Music – Text*, ed. & trans. Stephen Heath. New York 1977, pp. 25–27, also p. 21. Vilém Flusser, more influential in the German than in the Anglo-American discourse on photography, also fails to make such a distinction. In his book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Göttingen 1984), he devotes an entire chapter to the "distribution apparatus" of photographs but does not make note of

1 *Bunnies*, 1966. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Purchased from Gagosian Gallery, New York, May 15, 1992. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest and Purchase Funds, 1992

other images and associations – of immeasurable spaces and distant galaxies, of photoradiograms, of grainy television transmissions.[27] In this and other dotscreen or raster paintings, Polke, even as he utilises reproduced images and apes reproduction techniques, is in effect rendering the work unreproducible – unreproducible because it aims at effects absolutely dependent on our encounter with the original, unique object in its specific materiality and dimensions as we experience it in time and space. He was in effect reaffirming that "here and now" of the work of art that Benjamin associated with its aura.

One of the questionable assumptions underlying Benjamin's "reproduction thesis" is that the essential features of a work of art – even of one as structurally and spatially complex as a cathedral – can be captured within a reproduction; that the aura of an object constitutes no more than its "shell".[28] What is essential to an object is therefore reducible to its *image*, which can be extracted from its material constitution and its spatial being, which for him are identified with its aura. For Polke, however, these unreproducible dimensions are not a mere shell but are essential to the object and to our experience of it. Accordingly, even as he appears to pay homage to the medium of photomechanical reproduction it is not the aura of the work of art that Polke seeks to destroy but the authority of the reproduced image, which, in the *Bäckerblume* anecdote, is shown to have a fetishistic power.

Although Polke's dotscreen paintings may initially have been inspired in part by the example of Warhol and Rauschenberg, there are crucial differences. In appropriating photographic material and incorporating it into their work Warhol and Rauschenberg employed a commercial reproductive technique, the silk screen process, to transfer the images *mechanically* to canvas; Polke, however, *painted* his dotscreen pictures *by hand,* he proceeded disingenuously, as if he had misunderstood their practice. Perversely, although utilising reproduced imagery and imitating the appearance of a reproductive technique, he forfeited the advantages of such techniques, which, as Benjamin wrote of photography, "freed the hand of the most important artistic productions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens".[29] In terms of the effort demanded, these works by Polke are more akin to the excruciatingly laborious technique of Neo-Impressionism.[30]

In this respect, Polke's procedures – imitating the look of reproduction by "old-fashioned" manual painting – were more akin to those of another American Pop Artist, Roy Lichtenstein, except that, unlike him and like Warhol and Rauschenberg, Polke often used photographic material for his motifs. Also, Polke's dotscreen pictures are far more complex than Lichtenstein's of these same years, in which the Ben-Day dots, where they are used, are monochromatic and limited to selected shapes, functioning as a "sign" for the dotscreen reproductive process, rather than as a consistent transcription of it, as is the case in Polke's

the technical apparatus that makes such distribution possible. Someone who did make note of this distinction was Siegfried Kracauer, in his essay, "Die Photographie," published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of 1927, and quoted by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in his discussion of Polke's *Rasterbilder* . Id., "Polke und das Große Triviale mythisch oder pythisch?". In: Tübingen 1976; see note 21, p. 140: "This is what the film diva looks like. She is twenty-four years old, featured on the cover of an illustrated magazine, standing in front of the Hotel Excelsior Hotel on the Lido. . . . If one were to look through a magnifying glass one could make out the grain, the millions of little dots that constitute the diva, the waves, and the hotel. The picture, however, refers not to the dot matrix but to the living diva on the Lido." The full text of this essay can be found in: Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Mass. 1995, pp. 47–63.

24 Roland Barthes 1977; see n. 23, p. 17.

25 Roland Barthes 1981; see n. 23. p. 6.

26 Polke explained to Bice Curiger that in these works he wanted to push the image to the point where "there is no connection anymore between the subject and its reproduction . . . so that you are prepared to see the one as a subject and the other as a thing in its own right. . . . To exaggerate is also to reproduce and yet it undoes and renounces the original," the original in this case being the appropriated reproduction. See: "Poison is Effective; Painting is Not. Bice Curiger in Conversation with Sigmar Polke". In: *Parkett* no. 26 (1990), p. 21.

27 Dieter Hülsmanns, "Kultur des Rasters. Ateliergespräch mit dem Maler Sigmar Polke". In: *Rheinische Post*, no. 108 (May 10, 1966). I am grateful to Martin

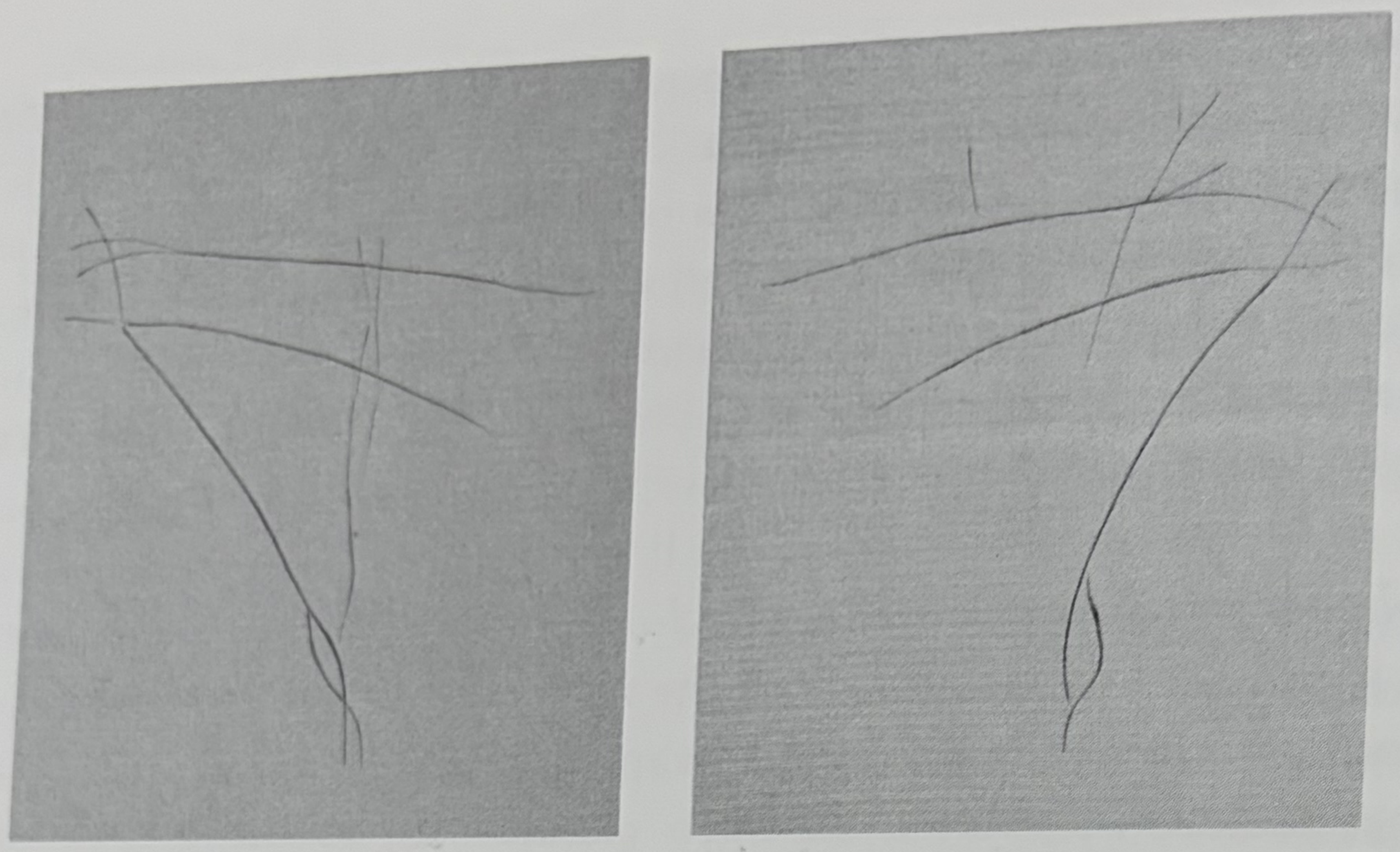
work.[31] Secondly, beginning in 1966, whenever Polke appropriated an image, he also appropriated the distinguishing marks of its reproductive technique as an integral part of that image. In most reproductive motifs in Warhol and Rauschenberg, the raster grid tends to be effaced by the silk-screen technique; the image takes on the qualities of its new medium. In this exaggeration of the raster Polke's practice also differed from that of his close friend of these years, Gerhard Richter, who was also painting from newspaper and magazine illustrations. This is evident in his paintings based on small newspaper photographs of the *Eight Student Nurses* murdered in a Chicago dormitory by Richard Speck in 1966, in which he suppresses the graininess of the original and strives to give the paintings the look of original, blurred photographs.[32]

Another feature of Polke's dotscreen pictures not found in their American counterparts is the occurrence of "printing errors". These spots were either taken over from irregularities in the raster of the source image or occurred in the course of the extremely taxing painting process – they already appear in what is probably the earliest work in this technique, *Rasterzeichnung (Lee Harvey Oswald)* [Rasterdrawing: see the text of Martin Hentschel elsewhere in this volume] as well as in *Berliner* and in the oddly floating red "lips" of *Bunnies* (illus. 1). One may regard these as manual interventions in a mechanically generated pattern, but they also have a further significance: they are, whether copied or resulting accidentally from fatigue, signs of the unique within a process of standardised repetition; indeed, even the printed source can be said to be unique when it displays such accidents.[33] Finally, the result in Polke's raster pictures is not, as with Warhol and Rauschenberg's silk screen paintings, a reproduction of a reproduction, but a *unique painting* of a reproduction. If Warhol and Rauschenberg extend the chain of reproduction and multiplication, Polke terminates it.

This affirmation of the unique within the multiple can also be found in another practice that Polke began in the 1960s and still occasionally follows today: the substitution of printed fabrics for canvas as painting supports. Here, too, we are dealing with the mechanically reproduced, but in this case not as a source for the painted image but as a component of the painting. In most of the fabrics the repeated pattern functions as a sign of the infinite reproducibility of the image. And yet, as Polke embellishes this image by means of painting it becomes unique – here, too, albeit in a different manner than in the raster paintings, repetition ends in the unique. And if in the raster pictures Polke laboriously converts the mechanically reproduced into a product of painterly craft, in the printed fabric paintings there is a juxtaposition of the mechanical and the painterly or, more precisely, of partial superimposition of the one upon the other.

It may in part have been the iridescent surfaces of some of these fabrics that showed Polke another means of affirming the "here and now" of the work of art, as in *Handlinien links* [Lines of the Left Palm] (illus. 2) and *Handlinien*

Hentschel for generously providing me with a photocopy of this early interview with Polke.
28 Benjamin 1969; see n. 3, pp. 221, 223. The cathedral is Benjamin's own example: "The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art."
29 Ibid., p. 219.
30 Buchloh was the first to point out the relationship to Seurat. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh 1976; see n. 23, pp. 140–142.
31 On these differences see Buchloh (ibid., p. 141) and Hentschel 1992; see n. 22, pp. 158–161. Not until 1969, with his paintings based on reproductions of Monet's *Rouen Cathedral* and *Haystack* series, did Lichtenstein adopt the dotscreen technique as a pervasive system.
32 For an illustration, see *Gerhard Richter* Bonn 1993, 3 vols., vol. 1, p. 39. (Exhibition: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn 1993–94.). The original newspaper source for the paintings is reproduced in: Fred Jahn (ed.), *Gerhard Richter. Atlas*. Munich 1989, p. 26.
33 See Polke/Curiger 1990; see n. 26, pp. 21–22.



2 *Handlinien,* 1968.
Kunstmuseum Bonn

*rechts* [Lines of the Right Palm], painted on monochromatic lurex, a glittery synthetic material used for evening gowns. Not only the luminosity and hue of the fabric seem to change at the slightest movement of the beholder, but even its weave – there is no fixed, definitive image, for it continually transforms itself through its ever changing interrelationship with the viewer and the light source – together they form a fluid three-part constellation. As in the raster paintings the viewer's experience of the painting unfolds perceptibly in time and space, although in the present case it is less a question of distance than of the angle of vision. It is as if Polke had set out to undermine the "autonomy" of art – an autonomy once praised, but today widely lamented – by purely visual means, in that the work's very appearance becomes dependent on its immediate surroundings. We shall return to this issue.

2.

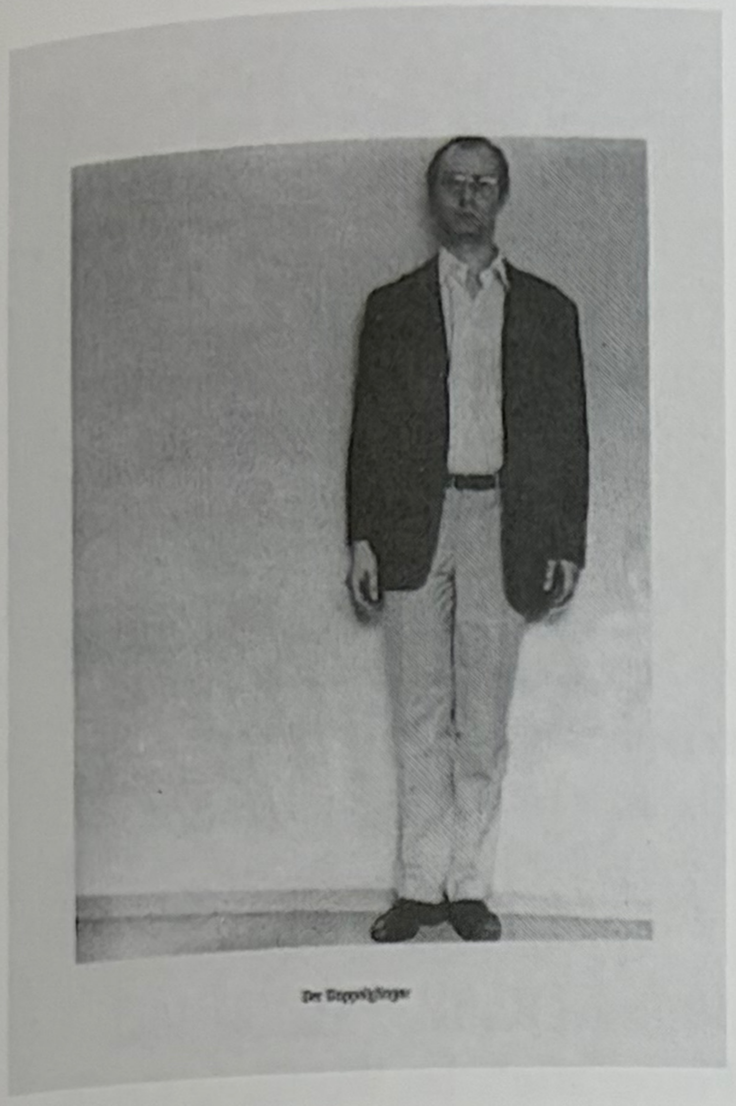
Polke's involvement with issues of uniqueness, reproducibility, and the status of the photographic image extends, not surprisingly, beyond his painting into his production in photography.[34] And here, too, he provokes a reassessment of the prevailing critical wisdom.

The multiple nature of the photographic print, asserted Benjamin, subverted the aura and its concomitant cult of authenticity: "From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the authentic print makes no sense".[35] Polke made playful reference to this multiple character of the photographic image in his print, *Der Doppelgänger* [The Double: see illus. 3], from his early portfolio, *Höhere Wesen befehlen* [Higher Beings Command]. The "double" in this case is Polke himself, which he explains with the comment: "What is meant is not so much the external similarity of two persons, as the simultaneous presence of my person in different places" – which may be taken as a witty, ironic reference to the multiplicity of the photographic image.[36] It is note-

34 On Polke's photography see Jochen Poetter (ed.), *Sigmar Polke. Fotografien*, Stuttgart 1990. (Exhibition: Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden 1990); Paul Schimmel (ed.), *Sigmar Polke. Photoworks: When Pictures Vanish.* Zürich/Berlin/New York 1995. (Exhibition: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 1995–96). Although Polke exhibited photographs as early as 1977 (in the Kassel Kunstverein; again in 1978 in the Galerie Gerhild Grolitsch in Munich), not until 1990 was his photographic work seen in a comprehensive retrospective.

35 Benjamin 1969; see n. 2, p. 224. But as Douglas Crimp has rightly observed, with the collecting of vintage prints, photography has also had an aura conferred upon it. Crimp 1980; see n. 16, p. 97.

36 Quoted from Poetter (ed.) 1990; see n. 34, p. 274. On Polke's prints, see John T. Paoletti, "-Higher Beings Command: The Prints of Sigmar Polke". In: *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 22, no. 2 (May–June 1991), pp. 37–43.



3 *Der Doppelgänger,* from the folio "..... *Höhere Wesen befehlen*", 1964

worthy, however, that Polke's portfolio edition does not consist of *photographs* pulled from their corresponding negatives, but rather of *offset* prints, i. e., from *reproductions* of photographs. In this relation the absent photographic original assumes a status comparable to that of the work of art for Benjamin, namely of the authentic, unique work that is reproduced. Within this context it becomes as unique as the "authentic" person Polke, and is of course no more simultaneously present in different places than he is! As will become apparent below, this play with the opposition unique/multiple is consistent with his later photographic practice. Polke treats photographs as unique images, so that in his case it does indeed make sense, *contra* Benjamin, to speak of "the authentic print".

At the beginning of the 1970s Polke began to produce unique photographic prints by experimenting with and – in terms of orthodox practice – misusing the chemistry of the photographic process.[37] This practice is dramatically evident in the Bowery photographs Polke made in 1973, in which he produced a sequence of unique images by provoking and manipulating photochemical "accidents" in the developing process (illus. 4, 5). In one of the more extreme cases (illus. 5), the image is veiled almost to the point of unrecognisability beneath a dense, symmetrical tissue of congealed developer, created by folding the cheap, thin recopy paper in half as it was immersed in a pan too small to accommodate it otherwise. The organic quality of this configuration – Jochen Poetter writes aptly of its evocation of "lungs laid bare, diseased and decayed", of "parts of organs, smeared with blood, squashed and torn", mutating into the two hemispheres of the brain[38] – fiercely asserts the medium's underlying chemistry, which normally conceals its own workings behind its miraculous simulacra.

In the *Bowery* series, as in the remarkable prints Polke made two years later based on images of a gay bar in São Paulo (illus. 6), we are reminded of the normally overlooked double indexical nature of the photograph: the print is an index not only of a moment in the existence of its referent; it is also the index of a moment in the existence of an image – more precisely, of its transfer onto a sheet of photo paper. This thin, crinkled paper also attracts attention to itself,

37 The first photos of this type relate to a sojourn in Paris. See Bice Curiger, *Sigmar Polke: Photographien, Paris 1971,* Cologne 1989; Paul Schimmel, "Polkography". In: Schimmel (ed.) 1995; see n. 37, pp. 63–65.
38 Poetter 1990; see n. 33, p. 104.

4/5 *Untitled*, from the series *Bowery New York*, 1973. Private collection

6 *Untitled*, from the series *São Paulo*, 1975. Helen van der Meij, London

and thus to the photographic print as a unique material artefact. Here, as in his earlier dotscreen paintings, Polke pries the two laminated leaves of the photographic image apart, separating the referent recorded on the negative from the chemical process that transforms it into an image. The traditional claim that photography distinguishes itself from painting through the lack of facture, that "it lacks the optically perceptible tension between image and the material that constitutes the image", clearly does not apply here.[39] Precisely this tension is a feature of these and other Polke photographic prints, which are as unique as paintings.[40]

For Benjamin, aura, manifest in part through the signs of duration, could be experienced not merely in the unique art object but also in the earliest photographs. This was because of the long exposure time they required, during which the models "grew into the image, as it were, and therefore made for a decided contrast to the figures in an instantaneous photograph".[41] A temporal dimension is also evident in Polke's photographs: it is, however, not the continuous time of the exposure, but two discrete segments of time, the instantaneous moment of the exposure, i. e. of the motif as recorded by the negative, and the moment in which the photographic print comes into being, evident in the traces of the photochemicals that are present independently of the image. The moment of the motif, which can seem as though ontologically present in a normal photograph, is in these Polke photographs pushed back to a time antecedent to that of the print.

Polke's photos thus achieve that synchronic experience of the diachronic that for Benjamin was characteristic of aura. The most apt analogy for this perception is perhaps one Benjamin himself used to illustrate what he meant by aura, which he defined as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch".[42] In these Polke photographs, the referent is the mountains and branch, the photographic print their shadow. It becomes a veil that envelops the original object; it becomes its aura.

39 Ernst Kallai, "Malerei und Fotografie". In: Wolfgang Kemp (ed.), *Theorie der Fotografie II, 1912–1945*. München 1979, p. 115.

40 A variation of this process of rendering the photograph unique are prints that Polke has partially overpainted. Examples are the photos of his Afghanistan series (1974/78), which he hand-colored, highlighting scratches on the prints, only after they had already been exhibited in the Kassel Kunstverein. On this see Paul Schimmel 1995 (n. 33, pp. 72–73, 156), who reproduces a print as it appeared before and after hand-coloring.

41 Walter Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt a. M. 1977, p. 373 (my translation). English translation: "A Short History of Photography," trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 5–26. For an illuminating discussion of the place of temporality in Benjamin's concept of aura as applicable to photography, see Michael Wetzel, "Il y aura. Über die Kunst, die Herzen schneller schlagen zu lassen". In: *Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* 9, no. 32 (1989), pp. 11–20.

42 Benjamin 1969; see n. 3. pp. 222–223.

3.

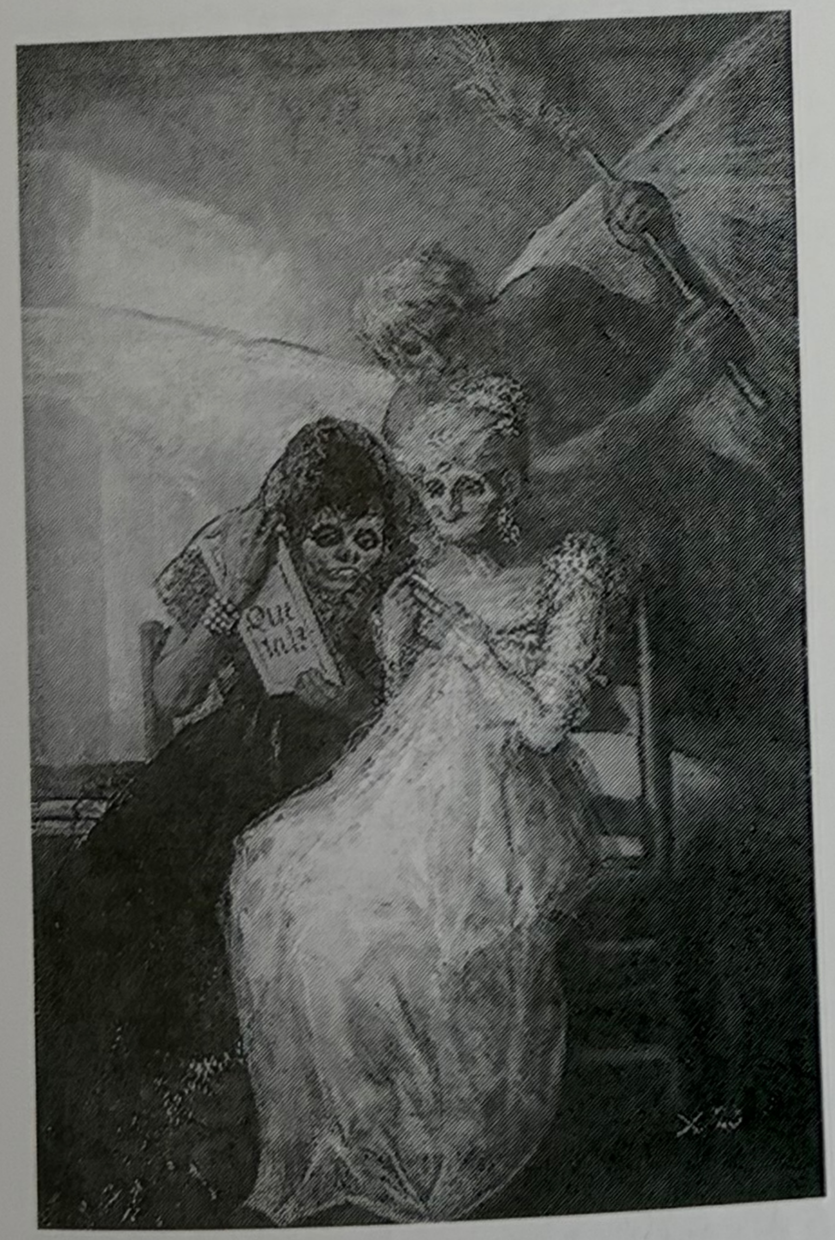
"The photographic reproduction of works of art as a phase in the battle between photography and painting" – thus reads a note in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.[43] As a result of the silkscreening techniques adopted by artists in the sixties, it appears that we entered a new phase of the battle: the reproduction of *reproductions* of works of art in painting, as in Robert Rauschenberg's *Persimmon* (1964) or in Roy Lichtenstein's raster paintings based on Monet's series of *Rouen Cathedral*. Yet this phenomenon has been relatively rare in Polke's painting – where he does use early works of art in this medium they are usually images from the printmaking media, as in *So sitzen Sie richtig (nach Goya)* [This Is How You Sit Correctly (after Goya)], 1983, based on number 26 of Goya's *Caprichos*, or *Frau Herbst und ihre zwei Töchter* [Mother Autumn and her Two Daughters], 1991, derived from Grandville's set of wood engravings on the four seasons.[44] This is consistent with Polke's practice of reliance on multiple images in his painting, with his conversion of the multiple into the unique.

In this respect Polke's cycle of photographs based on Goya's *The Old Women or Time* (illus. 7), produced in 1984, constitutes an exception. For here Polke does work with a photograph of a work of art, Goya's painting in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille, reversing the usual direction of his practice: instead of basing a unique painting on a multiple, namely a reproduction of a photograph, he here bases a series of photographs on a unique painting; photography is made from painting, the multiple is made from the unique. Yet even in this case, the multiplicity in the Goya series does not take the form of repetitions, for all of the photographs in Polke's Goya cycle, although based on a single negative, are unique images.

Moreover, rather than serving as protagonists in a "battle between photography and painting", the photographs of the Goya series blur the boundaries between the two media. In the darkroom, Polke has achieved through the photochemical process diaphanous veils of tone such as Goya achieved with oil paint, most notably, in the work reproduced here, in the white dress of the old woman and in the background. As layers of emulsion fuse with the forms of the painting, the image undergoes a strange metamorphosis, most amusingly in the phallic form that appears to have germinated out of the old woman's left hand, at which she directs a bewildered stare. As a photographer friend formulated it, Polke is in this series "using photographic emulsion as a medium for painting".[45]

Indeed, given the "painterly" handling of the medium and the source of the image in a Goya painting, it would seem that Polke had reduced the difference between painting and photography to one of the material substances involved, to a matter of chemistry. But, as we shall see, in certain paintings the 1980s Polke was at this time calling even this distinction into question.

43 Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt a. M. 1983, vol. 2, p. 826. English translation by the author.
44 An exception is the painting *Blue Boucher* (1994), which is based on a reproduction of a Boucher painting with a conspicuous dotscreen pattern. See Judith Nesbitt (ed.), *Join the Dots*, Liverpool 1995, p. 94. (Exhibition: Tate Gallery Liverpool 1995.)
45 I am indebted to Ashley Wilkes for this formulation.



7 Francisco José de Goya, *The Old Women or Time*, circa 1812. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille

4.

Since the 1980s Polke has developed new modes of pictorial practice that affirm the unreproducibility of his paintings, while reproductions, either of photographs or of graphic works, continue to serve him as motifs. Especially characteristic of this later phase, which continues into the present, is his use of artificial resin in such a manner that it causes the fluctuation of the image through the movements of the beholder. The reflections from these glossy surfaces, which can be such an irritant in viewing paintings by earlier masters, are embraced by Polke as a positive factor and exploited to enliven the picture surface in the most enchanting fashion.

8 *Hochsitz II*, 1984–85. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; William R. Scott, Jr. Fund, 1985

The *Hochsitz* [Hunting Tower] series of 1984–88, in which Polke used the image of a hunting tower as a sinister evocation of both the Nazi death camps and the death strip enclosing the GDR, offers excellent examples. A work of 1984, for example, executed in acrylic and artificial resin on printed fabric (illus. 8), reconfigures itself with the slightest lateral movement of the viewer in space. This is due in part to the tawdry sparkle of the fabric that serves as the ground of the left two-thirds of the painting, but above all to the irregular application of resin, alternately poured and brushed onto the canvas, resulting in a highly fluctuant reflective surface. From one viewing position, in which the resin does not reflect light, it merely gives the painting a translucent golden glow; from a second standpoint it becomes a glaring, irregular pattern of reflective shapes that obscures the image of the tower and alters the distribution of tonal and colour relationships.

This ever shifting luminosity evokes, appropriately, the ominous effect of a wandering searchlight, as though in observing a watchtower we, too, become observed.[46] This recalls that a watchtower is a place of surveillance. In this regard this motif embodies a subject-object relation as well as position of power and domination. Of course, we are not really being watched from the tower; rather this motif is probably meant to disrupt the normal orientation of the beholder toward the art object, for experientially the relationship can no longer be neatly described with the strict opposition of subject/object. In its appearance the painting emerges and transforms itself in a mutual relationship with the observer; it has no definitive appearance in and of itself that is independent of the beholder – for this reason the painting cannot really be reproduced without sacrificing the fugitive character that constitutes its most salient effect. The motif of the watchtower may be said to serve as a metaphor for the altered relationship of the beholder to the painting – its paradigmatic character may perhaps be the reason why Polke created at least seven versions of this theme.

Polke's paintings of the eighties present us, however, not merely with an optical but also with a material transmutability. It is in this regard that the much discussed "alchemical" model in Polke's art became important.[47] Alongside the pigments traditionally used in Western painting Polke at this time began

46 See John Caldwell, "Sigmar Polke". In: *Sigmar Polke*, San Francisco 1990, pp. 11–13. (Exhibition: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990–91.) In the *Hochsitz* series there is a striking parallel, first pointed out by Caldwell, between Polke's practice and another description of aura by Benjamin: "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return". The Benjamin passage can be found in his essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire". In: Benjamin 1969; see n. 3, p. 188.

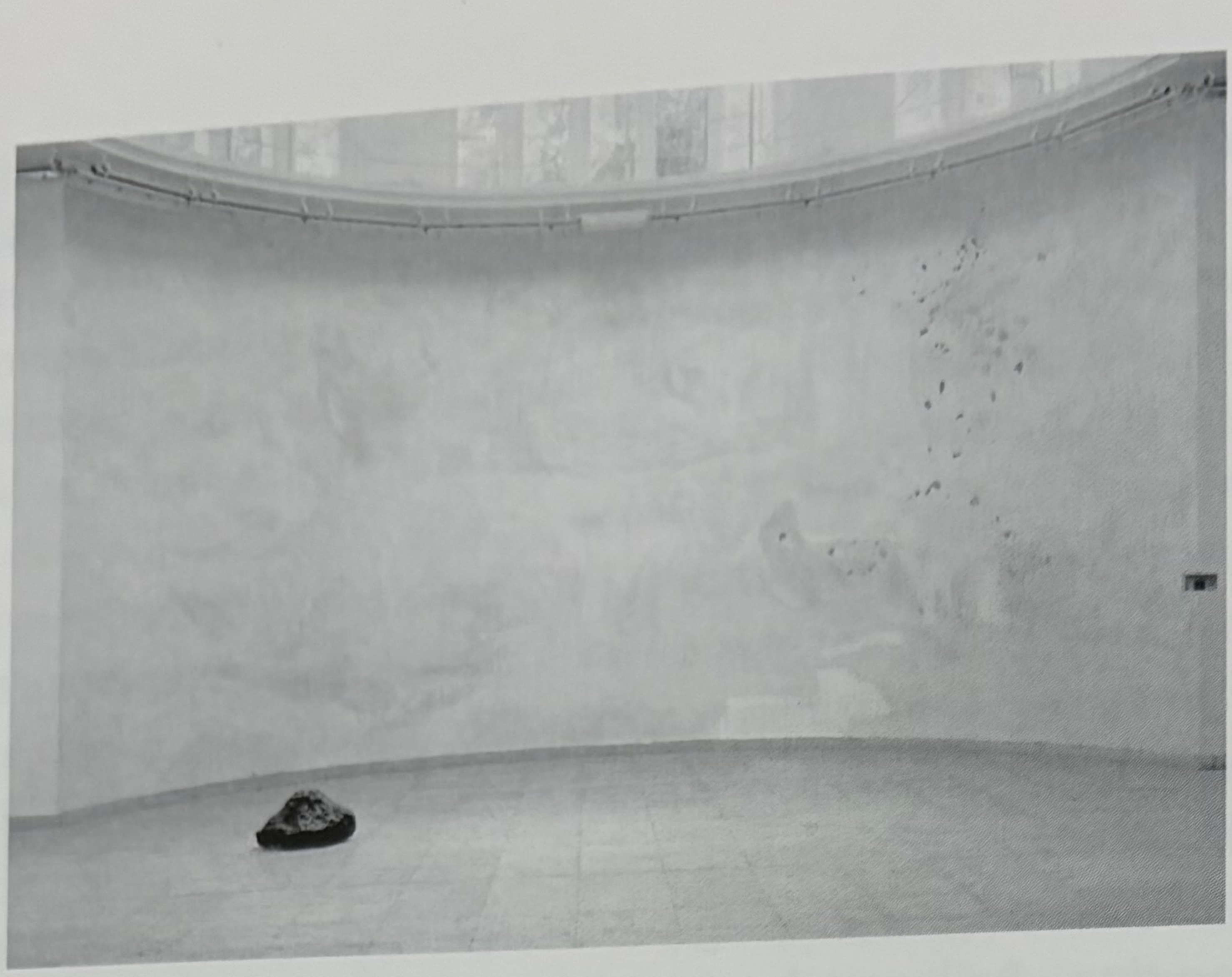
47 On this aspect of Polke's work see the bibliographic references in Dierk Stemmler, *Sigmar Polke. 6 Kunststoffsiegel-Bilder. Zyklus aus der 42. Biennale Venedig 1986*. Mönchengladbach 1994, p. 24, n. 4.

to experiment with "an entire arsenal of chemicals".[48] Painting increasingly became a medium not merely for the transformation of images, as in Polke's paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, but also of material substances. And those "changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years", which for Benjamin contributed to its aura, have occurred in certain paintings of Polke within an extremely brief span of time, sometimes even before the eyes of the beholder.[49]

It is easy to assume a continuity between Polke's practice in the darkroom and his enthusiastic experimentation with the chemical properties of his painting materials.[50] Just as Polke worked contrary to correct dark room procedure so as to explore the chemical constitution of photography and its usually overlooked double index, in his paintings of the early 1980s he undertook all kinds of technical experiments, which seemingly were directed against the craft tradition of Western painting. Polke maintains, however, that it was not his darkroom experiments but his journey to Australia and New Guinea at the beginning of the 1980s that was the real catalyst. There he encountered other traditions of thinking about colours that were thoroughly foreign to the aesthetic tradition of European painting. Polke tells, for example, of Australian Aborigines, who cut open a vein in order to use their own blood as pigment for body painting.[51] As he explained to Bice Curiger, he "started thinking about colour and its treatment, but I also thought about how, for example, Hinduism explains and uses colour or how Australians use colour. The whole business of red and yellow and green out of a tube, which is perfectly valid, but I started thinking about what it is".[52] He now strove to make manifest the natural origins and material identity of his chosen pigments, and for this reason after his return he was especially interested in seeking out poisonous pigments like Schweinfurt green to make use of them in his paintings, precisely because such colours would perhaps compel the viewer to regard them more as poison than as colour.[53]

Although the illegal pigment Schweinfurt Green does not appear, in several paintings Polke nevertheless made use of pigments that are classified as "poisonous", in some cases even as "extremely poisonous": for example, in the tripartite group *Negativwerte* [Negative Values], 1982 he employed Saturn red (minium); this colour he also used in one of the *Sieben Farbtafeln* [Seven Colour Panels] created for his 1986 Biennale exhibition. Arsenic trisulfide, malachite, and azurite, which also occur in this series, are poisonous as well.[54] More important than their poisonous quality, however, was the instability of certain pigments. Polke regards every painting, not merely his own, as something alive, in that chemical processes are continuously at work in them.[55] Precisely this quality was prominent in his exhibition in the German Pavilion at the 1986 Venice Biennale: he named the installation "Athanor" after the alchemical furnace – quite aptly, since the exhibition became a site of transformation.[56]

48 See Harry Szeemann, "Halonen am Firmament der Bilder". In: *Sigmar Polke*. Zürich 1984, p. 11. (Exhibition: Kunsthaus Zürich, 1984.)
49 Quoted from Walter Benjamin 1969; see n. 3, p. 220.
50 See, for example, Walter Grasskamp, "Erleuchtung in der Dunkelkammer. Sigmar Polke". In: *Wolkenkratzer Art Journal* 3, no. 4 (September–October 1986), pp. 7–39.
51 Polke, in conversation with the author, May 1995.
52 Interview Polke/Curiger 1990; s. n. 26, p. 19.
53 Ibid., p. 20. Schweinfurt green is considered "the most poisonous and dangerous of all pigments" (Max Doerner, *The Materials of the Artist and their Use in Painting*, rev. ed. London 1949, p. 83.). See also Kurt Wehlte, *Werkstoffe und Techniken der Malerei.* Ravensburg 1967, pp. 142–143. Wehlte reports a case of poisoning that occurred in Berlin in 1928, "in which an English wallpaper with unstable distemper of Schweinfurt green , at that time long forbidden in Germany, was only much later recognized as the cause of death".
54 Kurt Wehlte 1967; see n. 52, pp. 96, 105, 136, 154. See also Polke/Curiger 1990; see n. 26, p. 20.
55 Polke, in conversation with the author, May 1995.
56 On Polkes Biennale-Installation see Dierk Stemmler, *Sigmar Polke. Athanor. Il Padiglione*. Venice 1986. (Exhibition: XLII Biennale di Venezia); Martin Hentschel 1992; see n. 22, pp. 405–417; Laszlo Glozer, "Speculations on Polke in Venice". In: *Parkett* no. 30 (1991), pp. 72–79; Hans Dickel, Über Natur und Kunst in Sigmar Polkes 'Athanor', Venedig 1986. In: *Kritische Berichte* no. 19 (1991), pp. 63–76.



9 Wall painting with hygroscopic paint at the XLII Biennale in Venice, Pavilion of the Federal Republic of Germany, 1986

The notoriously damp climate of Venice has, of course, made this lagoon city into a nightmare for conservators – works like Giorgione's frescoes in the Fondaco dei Tedeschi perished for this reason. It is typical of Polke's approach that he made the humidity of the city into his artistic collaborator. In each of the *Sieben Farbtafeln* he mixed a single dry pigment with sturgeon glue – "very hygroscopic" (i. e. sensitive to changes in humidity) and not to be recommended, according to one painting manual, and therefore probably the worst possible binding medium for Venice.[57]

At Venice the most dramatic examples of Polke's reconceptualising of painting as a process of chemical metamorphosis were his so-called hydro-paintings, executed on the conch wall of the Pavilion, which gradually changed colour with in response to changes in the humidity (illus. 9). Martin Hentschel has described the metamorphosis of colour that he witnessed over the course of three visits within a period of two days. During his first visit, around one o'clock in the afternoon, the dominant impression was of "an overall milky tone, with tendencies toward both a pale rose and pale blue". Toward evening of the same day "all of the rose tones had nearly disappeared, the entire conch appears in a cool, pale blue colour with tendencies toward gray". The next morning at eleven the pictures had changed again: the wall had assumed a saturated turquoise blue colour, but with a faint rose undertone. The painting medium that effected this continual transformation of colour was "a cobalt chloride solution, which turns reddish in damp air, but changes over to blue in dry air".[58] To designate these and similar pictures – among them are six lacquer paintings and eleven graphite "curlicue" pictures should be mentioned[59] – as "abstract" would be misleading, for Polke is at pains to present each of the material components of his art literally and concretely; the discrete identity of the various material components of each painting – pigments, graphite, binding medium, resin, etc. – is faithfully preserved.

57 Max Doerner 1949; see n. 53, pp. 224–225.

58 Martin Hentschel 1992; see n. 22, pp. 411–413.

59 The "Lacquer Paintings" are today in the collection of the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach. See Dierck Stemmler 1994; see n. 47. The "Schleifenbilder" or "curlicue pictures", so named after their motifs derived from the calligraphic ornaments in Albrecht Dürer's *Great Triumphal Chariot of Kaiser Maximilian*, are today in the collection of the Staatsgalerie of Munich. On this group of works, see. Ulrich Bischoff and Carla Schulz-Hoffmann: *Sigmar Polke. Schleifenbilder*. Stuttgart 1992.

A particularly interesting group of works produced with unstable materials is the aforementioned *Hochsitz* series. In four of these canvases Polke made liberal use of silver, against whose instability Cennino Cennini warned artists over 500 years ago: "you are to work with as little silver as you can, because it does not last, and it turns black… ".[60] Precisely this liability is dramatically evident in Polke's *Hochsitz II* [Hunting Tower II: see illus. 8], executed in silver, silver oxide and artificial resin on canvas. It is of course the light-sensitive property of silver that has made it the basis of photographic emulsions, and it is above all because of its photochemical properties that Polke has made use of it in this and three other works in the Hochsitz series.[61] In effect, the combination of silver and silver compounds with resin seems to function as an emulsion coating the surface of the canvas.[62] Accordingly, one suspects that in *Hochsitz II* the image was transferred to the canvas by photochemical means, by being projected onto the light-sensitive ground.[63] In effect the painting is less a painting than a gigantic photogram on canvas, one of the most dramatic examples of how Polke blurs the long established antithesis between painting and photography by treating both as chemical processes.

Light, too, which increasingly becomes a component of Polke's paintings of the later 1980s, contributes to their metamorphotic effect – not the arrested light of the photograph, not the painted light that one finds in paintings from Giovanni Bellini to Matisse, but the actual light of the "here and now", which unites painting and beholder in a dynamic situation. This light animates the pictorial surface and will always animate it, as long as there are human beings to look at it. Now as before, Polke uses irregularly poured veils of resin, but the resultant effects of reflection and transparency have since 1988 been intensified through his use of translucent polyester as a support.[64] Since 1992, for example in the tripartite work from this year, *Apparizione I–III,* Polke used a polyester fabric with a textured parquet pattern, which becomes visible only when seen from particular angles and which, in combination with the irregular applications of colour and artificial resin, contributes to the complexity of light effects on the surface.

Whoever peers behind one of these pictures will see the wall bathed in a luminous glow of coloured light, which in turn is reflected back through the diaphanous screen of the support and intensifies and enriches the general effect of colour. In many works paint and resin have been applied to the back of the support; from behind the polyester, the colours radiate softly, seeming dematerialised, just as in a luminous fog mists of colour seem to float free of any object. This same effect also occurs with the stretcher bars, now often faintly visible as a blurred architectonic element through the fabric, which softens their hard edges. Indeed; in some pictures it appears as if this structure were a painted one;[65] paint and wood assume the same soft, seemingly vaporous glow.

60 Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook "Il Libro dell' Arte"*, trans. Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. New York 1960, p. 60.

61 The others are: *Hochsitz (Bufo Tenin)*, 1984, executed in silver, silver bromide, and natural resins on canvas, illustrated in: San Francisco 1990; see n. 46, plate 48; *Hochsitz III*, 1985, in silver, silver nitrite, iodine, Cobalt II, chloride, and artificial resin on canvas, illustrated in Ibid., plate. 50; and *Hochsitz*, 1984, silver nitrate, dammar, and canvas, illustrated in *Sigmar Polke. Transit.* Schwerin 1996, p. 35. (Exhibition: Staatliches Museum Schwerin 1996.)

62 Compare Michael Langford, *Basic Photography*, 5th ed. London 1986, pp. 154–156.

63 Without going into detail, John Caldwell writes that "Polke made the painting using a process akin to photography." He writes that the tower "is delineated by the absence of the silver oxide that forms a multicolored sheen … over the rest of the canvas." Caldwell 1990; see n. 46, pp. 12, 15 n. 3.

64 Here see Dierk Stemmler, *Sigmar Polke. Neue Bilder 1992.* Mönchengladbach 1992, p. 11, n. 1. (Exhibition: Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach 1992.)

65 I confess to making this error when I first saw these pictures at the 1990 Polke retrospective in the Hirshhorn Museum.

Through Polke's incorporation of the structure of the stretcher into the image he achieves a new kind of spatial effect. *Flüchtende* [Refugees: illus. 10] offers an especially moving example.[66] The foreshortened dotscreen image of a fleeing couple has been transferred to a support consisting of two pieces of polyester that have been sewn together. In the upper half the polyester is unprinted and lightly transparent; the lower fabric is less translucent and has a fluid printed pattern consisting of bands and dots, which at first glance might appear to have been painted. The human figures themselves are framed by a soft green aura, produced by the dispersion applied to the rear of the support.

As with the early raster paintings of the 1960s, the beholder's experience of *Flüchtende* unfolds in space and time. In approaching the work one has that experience of the gradually dissolving image, except that in this case the more complex material construction of the work becomes gradually more evident as one moves closer. From a middle distance there is a tension between these two poles of illusion and material fact. And in contrast to the early raster paintings, image and painting are no longer identical. In the early raster works the entire painting was constructed of Ben-Day dots; upon closer scrutiny the image slowly dissolved into these elements. In Polke's paintings since the late 1980s the raster motif no longer fills out the entire surface; it is now only one component of the painting among others; its open, translucent appearance on the diaphanous support underlines this fact; it is an extraneous element. And in *Flüchtende* this fact produces a strange and powerful effect: the horizontal printed pattern in the lower half of the painting seems to block the movement of the fleeing couple, even as from the rear they seem pressed forward by the stretcher bars. This desperate pair, running toward us, seems cruelly trapped, their escape arrested by the physical limits of the painting. There is no way out. And, paradoxically, the intensified effect of the image is a direct consequence of its relativisation, of its illusion-negating reduction to a sober construction of wood, polyester, artificial resin and dispersion.

10 *Flüchtende,* 1992. Carré d'Art, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Nîmes

5.

As noted earlier, in his "Work of Art" essay Benjamin took the position that the privileging of the original, auratic work of art was essentially regressive, identified with useless aesthetic contemplation and "asocial behaviour". Accordingly, Polke's reassertion of the here and now of the unique work of art, his imaginative cultivation of flagrantly unreproducible effects that become its core, might be regarded as yet another desperate attempt at reasserting traditional artistic values such as "originality and genius" and subjective expression, in a last-ditch effort to salvage the supposedly obsolete medium of painting. Such a view would be profoundly mistaken. Far from being a nostalgic attempt to return to the *status quo ante*, Polke's project should rather be seen as a necessary corrective to

66 On this painting see Guy Tosatto, "The Three Lies of Painting", in: *Sigmar Polke*. Nîmes 1994, pp. 82–87. (Exhibition: Carré d'Art. Musée d'Art contemporain de Nîmes 1994.)

Benjamin's problematic thesis. His art is a form of persistent, critical questioning of precisely the terms of opposition that are uncritically accepted within our culture, those very oppositions around which, in Rosalind Krauss's view, postmodernist practice organises itself. In Polke's case the questioning is directed against the oppositional pairs uniqueness/reproducibility, painting/photography, subject/object, and, in the "alchemical" paintings of the eighties, art/nature. Further, I would argue, his art achieves a dialectical sublation of such traditional antitheses. The nature of Polke's dialectical play with these first three oppositions should be apparent by now, but a further word need be said about the last.

Art is a microcosm of humankind's relationship to nature. Painting exemplifies in concentrated form our attempt to control and dominate nature. Of all art forms, it offers perhaps the most striking example of how natural substances are harnessed, transfigured, and subordinated to the purposes of culture, of how their own identity is sacrificed and forgotten in the service of illusion. All visible traces of the natural origins of colours are effaced as they are ground into powder, mixed with binding media (usually also natural substances), and in this homogenised form are sold in tubes as "artist's colours". For Polke, on the other hand, colour is not simply colour, but original matter, nature, a part of the geochemical organism that is the planet. For him, the craft of painting aims not at counteracting natural processes but rather at activating them, of working collaboratively with them. Once he has selected his materials, it is above all the open-ended play of these natural processes, not Polke's own subjectivity or intentions, that determines the work's appearance. He employs the various "elements in powdered from simply to see what happens. … It's the procedures in and for themselves that interest me. The picture isn't really necessary. … The unforeseeable is what turns out to be interesting".[67]

Historically, according to Benjamin's contemporary Carl Einstein, art has promoted the "illusion of the immutability of things"; images have confirmed "the certainty of things". Einstein, however, advocated an art that would destroy precisely this illusion of stability by means of a metamorphotic drama: pictures should serve "to intensify unrest and disorder, instead of fading rankly like decaying spirits".[68] As a painter Polke acts in a spirit similar to Einstein in that his paintings make visible the vital and with it also the mutable of the real. In creating works whose appearance cannot be fixed, which continually transform themselves, not only optically, through the movements of the beholder, but also through the chemical processes which are often made visible within them, Polke affirms anew that diachronic dimension that for Benjamin was identified with aura, but at the same time undermines another equation of Benjamin's, in which duration [Dauer] is identified with the original work of art, while transience [Flüchtigkeit] is a quality of the reproduction.[69] In actuality, reproductions of Polke's works prove more stable and "permanent" than the originals, even if

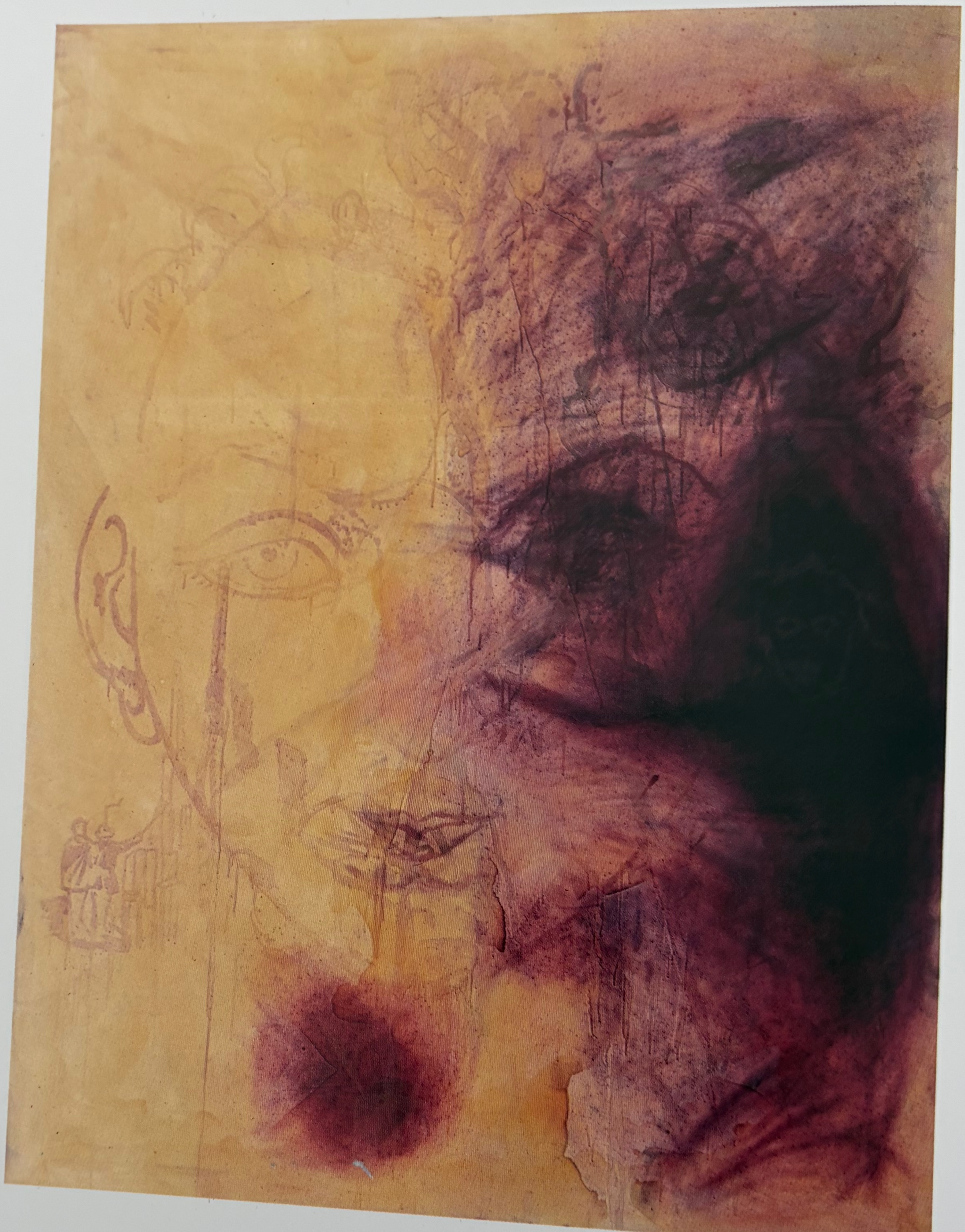
67 "What interests me is the unforeseeable. Sigmar Polke talks about his work". In: *Flash Art* (May–June 1988), p. 70.
68 Carl Einstein, *Werke Band 3. 1929–1940*, ed. Marion Schmid und Liliane Meffre. Vienna and Berlin 1985, pp. 30, 33, 154.
69 Walter Benjamin 1969; see n. 3, p. 223.

they fail to capture fundamental aspects of that work at a given moment in time. For it is not merely a work's authenticity that cannot be reproduced, as Benjamin believed, but the fate it shares with all the matter. In denying this truth, reproduction, the medium of "the museum without walls", serves the myth of the immortality of art, and promotes it dehistoricisation and commodification. Polke's unreproducible paintings and photographic prints, even as they affirm the unique, auratic here and now of the work of art, undermine the myth of art's timelessness. For an experience of the uniqueness of the work is neceesary for an experience of its essentially fugitive character, of its subordination to the laws of chemical transmutation and decay. As such, Polke's recent painting would seem to fulfil a hope for art expressed by Theodor W. Adorno:

If art, having once recognized duration as an illusion, could renounce it, if it could incorporate its own mortality into itself out of sympathy with the ephemeral nature nature of the living, then that would be appropriate to a conception of truth not as something eternal and abstract, but as grounded in time.[70]

70 My translation from the German edition, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970). The cited passage can be found on page 42 of the English edition (see note 4).

The Copyist 1982





The Instructor 1982

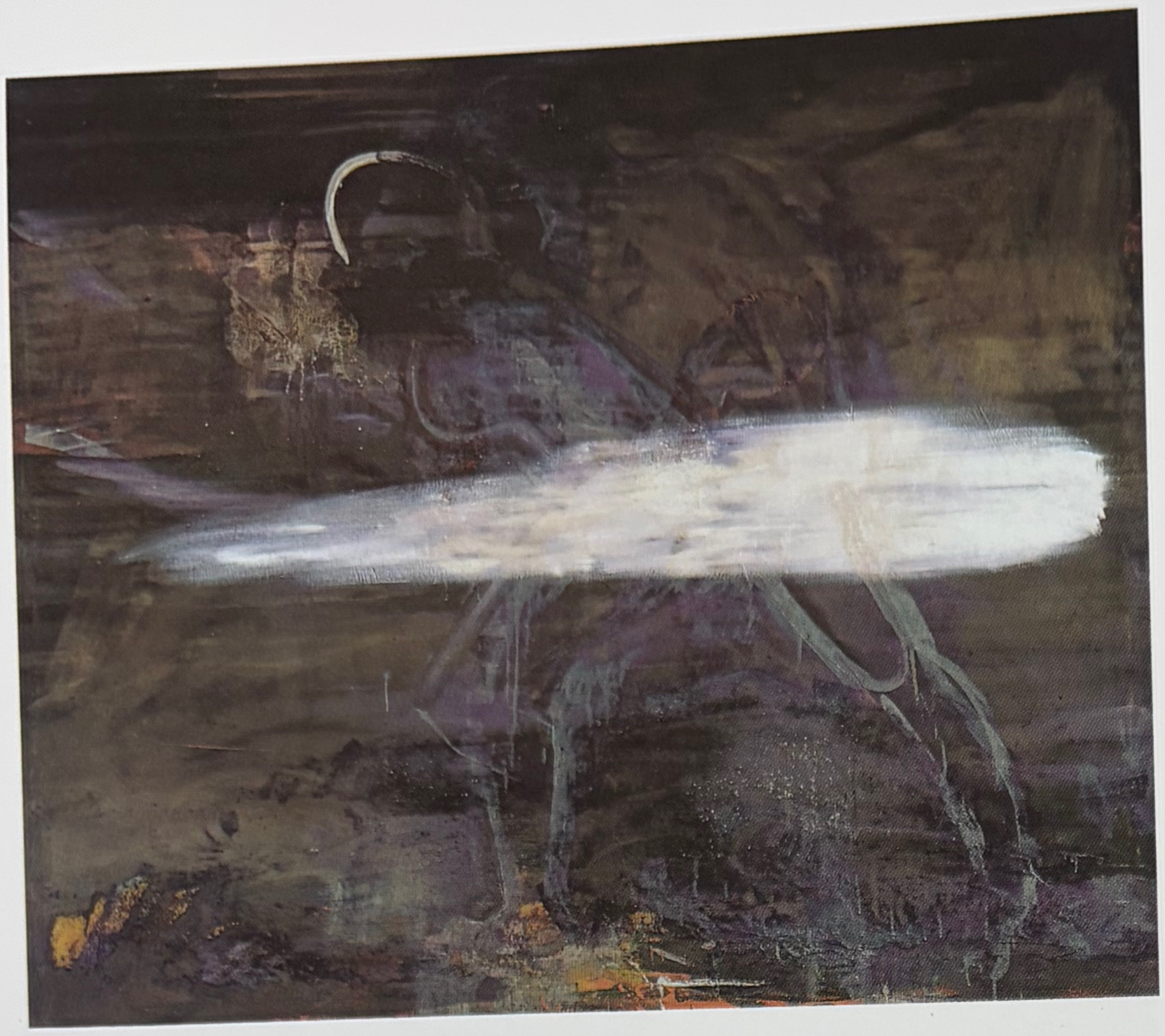
Das haben wir noch nie so gemacht 1982

Da könnte ja jeder kommen 1982

Der Traum des Menelaos  1982



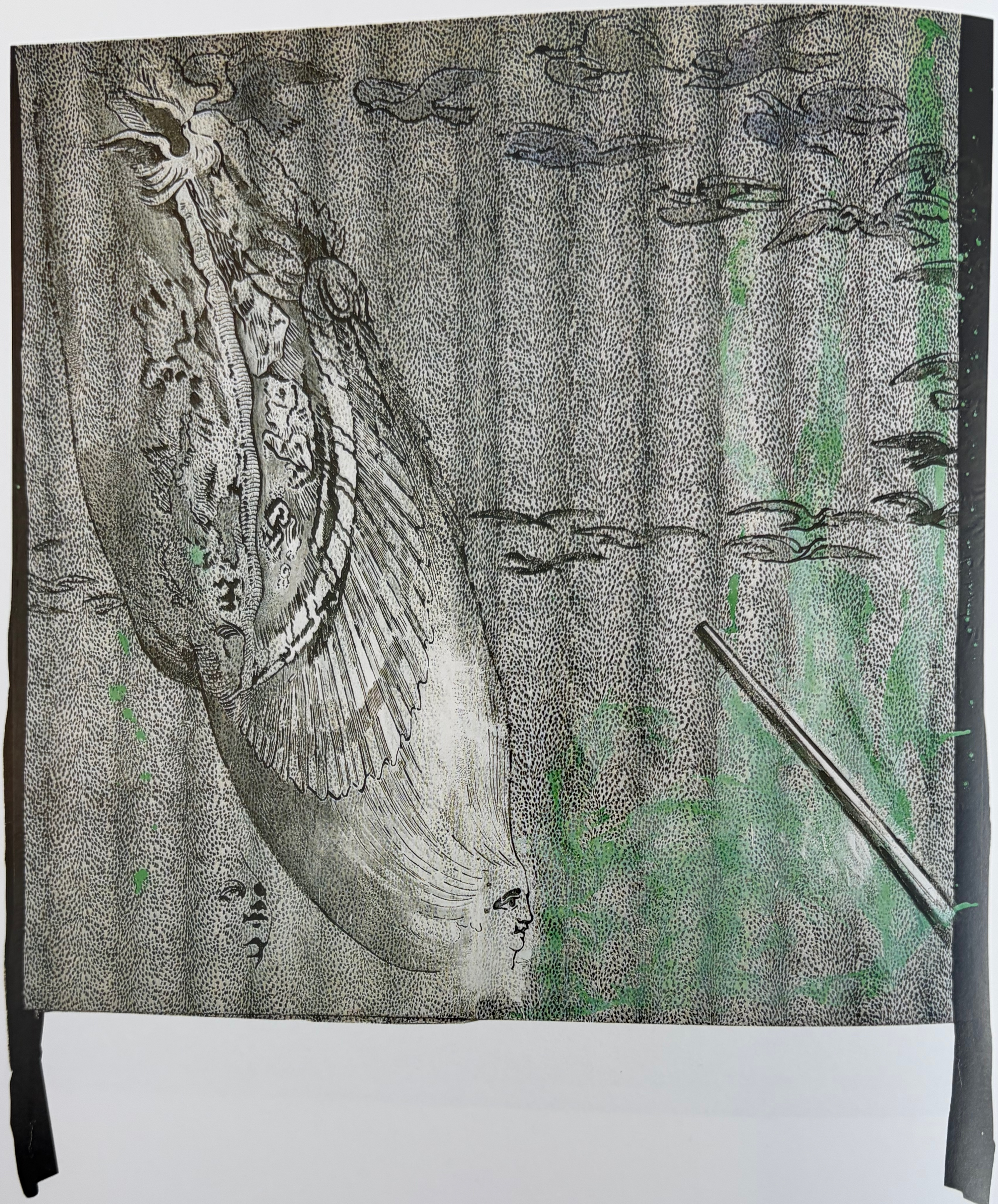
Der Traum des Menelaos II (Kuh und Schaf gehen zusammen aber der Adler steigt allein)  1982



Komet 1982

Koloß 1982

Gespenst 1982





Die Perücke 1983

RUDI H. FUCHS

# What You Don't See

Often, and that being certainly so with the work of Sigmar Polke, the start of an artwork takes place long before the point at which it actually takes shape. By "start" I do not mean conception. I think that the conception is a moment of already fairly precise, concrete considerations in which the work, which will still continue to grow to its completion, gradually makes itself known. The conception gives a direction, an objective, to the thought process. The conception is an instrumental moment; but the start of an artwork, or the start of its conception, lies farther back. An artwork begins when impulses become apparent to the eyes and in the thoughts of an artist: visual details and fragments whose coherence and configuration are not yet clear, but which, in any event, seem to be moving toward each other and then circle about one another like sperm looking for an ovum. In this case we are speaking about a complex of works, which, having once found a form, became comprised of photographs of various sizes (some rather large) and a series of reworked photocopies. In the massive catalogue of Sigmar Polke's photographic work (1990: Kunsthalle Baden-Baden), this complex is given the title *Die Alten* [The Old Women] and dated 1982. For the individual photographs, however, 1984 is the designated date and for the drawn-on photocopies, 1983. This discrepancy makes one suspect that 1982 was the year of the conception; after this, works were actually made, that is to say printed and, in the case of the photocopies, selected and arranged. The idea of this work therefore came about in 1982. In December 1983 a number of the drawn-on photocopies were published as a fragment in the catalogue of Polke's exhibition at museums in Rotterdam and Bonn. Not until the catalogue of 1990 do the works appear as a connected group, with the mentioned title and date of conception. And so it is through the course of the eighties that *Die Alten* assumes its definitive shape as work of art, or *tentative* definitive shape, because with Polke's alchemistic way of working it is not entirely impossible for additions to still be made to this. Once the form was established, the work took on an objective quality; the impulse fragments that were still adrift at the start have now found each other. It now seems as though there had always been some sort of purposefulness in the gradual development of the work; but that is not the case. The iconographic clarity was not there in the beginning either. In order to have a good understanding of this work, and of Polke's character as an artist, one needs to seek out the practical and even playful origins as much as possible. As I recall, even before 1982 Polke was showing me photocopies of a black-and-white photograph of the Goya painting by which the whole process

This essay was published initially in Dutch on the occasion of the award of the 1994 Erasmus Prize in Amsterdam.

began: *The Old Women* or *Time* (ca. 1812) in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille. He also went to look at the actual painting; whether he had already seen it as a reproduction in a book, I cannot say. It isn't unlikely. The work of Goya had interested him for some time, particularly because of the caricatural and grotesque elements in that artist's style; Polke himself also likes to set out in this direction. Goya's painting shows, in the foreground, two old women. The distinguished, genteel lady on the right is wearing a fine dress of tulle, though it is too youthful and vain for her age. She is covered with jewels, but in the bony, hollow face her mouth is toothless. The other woman, in black, is her servant. Together they are looking into a mirror that the servant is holding up to her. The face of the servant has the taut features of a cadaver. On the mirror is the inscription *Oue tal?* [How it is going?]. From behind, the winged figure of Saturn, or Father Time, is bending over them like the broom that sweeps life into death, threatening to make its attack. The most distant background in the painting is vague and light – but it was this very background that had drawn Polke's attention. *He thought that he discerned a fourth figure there:* one which was concealed within the painting (as with so many paintings) and which could be discovered. The photocopies produced a strange, sketchy image, the lights and darks being accented differently in these, with less detail and thus more mysteriously; and it was from those accents that Polke began to draw. In the catalogue from 1990 these drawings are described as "Vermutungszeichnungen" [surmised drawings]. That is the right word for them. It was like looking long and intensively at clouds passing by or at the night sky, to then recognise all sorts of configurations in this: birds, dragons, landscapes and profiles of faces. Doing this was nothing new for Sigmar Polke. In his rich and varied painting, he had always been concerned with allowing mysterious forms and patterns to emerge. An early work (1968) shows how he had discovered his own name among the twinkling stars: *"Der Sternhimmel am 24. 6. 24 Uhr zeigt als Sternbild den Namenszug S. Polke"*. At the very time that he was looking for the hidden figure in Goya's painting, he began to mix pigments with certain chemical substances. These produced the most remarkable colours that moved in a slow, fluid manner across the surface, while, through or as a result of the chemical activity in the colour, the shapes moreover stayed in motion for a long time. It is a type of painting which appeared in Polke's oeuvre then around 1980, and which can be described as moving forms and colours that slowly come to a standstill, and then become a painting. With that in mind, in that light, Polke was also looking at the photocopies of the painting by Goya. He also made photocopies of photocopies. Unexpected shifts of forms emerged in these, thus prompting new drawings. Later, when he started to make large photographs (mostly of details from Goya's painting), he brought about distortions and accentuations by manipulating the photochemical development process in the very way, actually, that he made his paintings then. In fact, the entire series, *Die Alten*, an "experimental" composite of that group, can therefore be regarded as an *allegory* of Polke's unusual and

*X-ray photo of Goya's painting, 'The Old Women' or 'Time'*, 1984. Private collection

remarkable way of making art. What he presupposes, in his painting but also in the drawings and scribblings on photocopies, is the existence of a mysterious energy that commands those images and charges them with tension.

Before 1982, when Polke showed me the photocopies on which he had drawn and would continue to draw, the project was still without form. The later work *Die Alten* was still in a state of beginning: notes, fragments, scribbles, ideas. At that point, moreover, he did *not* have access to the X-ray of Goya's painting. A reproduction of this can be found in the 1990 catalogue – but then the process of a beginning had grown, by way of a conception, into a mature work. In the context of that work, dated 1982, the X-ray acts as *evidence:* for it shows that another painting, a Resurrection of Christ, is in fact hidden beneath the present painting. It is important to know that the first "Vermutungszeichnungen" on the photocopies came about *without* the knowledge obtained from the X-rays. Polke's "research" is, after all, an artistic matter; it is not about an art-historical reconstruction of a lost painting. On careful examination of the drawings on the photocopies, it appears that these drawings also seem to "discover" or make one presume the existence of all sorts of form and figures – but they don't even suggest the resurrected Christ that is supposed to be located, according to the X-ray, in the upper lefthand corner of the painting.

The drawings felt their own way: this was indicated by the energy stored within the image. Also the large photographs, printed in 1984, search more for this energy than for the lost or no-longer-visible figure which, like a phantom, stood at the vague, playful start of this now more or less finished work.

The series *Die Alten* (1982) is, I suggested, an allegory of Sigmar Polke's way of creating images. It is a practical, even uncomplicated demonstration of this. As such Polke shows himself to be a typically European artist, as an artist who is fully convinced that images have bottomless depths, complex stratifications and mysterious forces and energies that, when images are good, keep them alive. Polke has made this conviction one of the great themes of this work: it is that, precisely that, which he shows in *Die Alten*. The Americans (who were Europe's competitors during the post-war period) have developed a different and essentially didactic version of modern art. No matter what style is assumed, from abstract to figurative (in the manner of Pop Art), American paintings stand out by way of their uncomplicated clarity; they have a beginning and an end, and they aren't filled (like the paintings of Polke or like the sculptural installations of Joseph Beuys) with incomplete fragments. Even apparently confused paintings like those of Pollock are crystal clear. American aesthetics have a preference for objects that are finished; that is why, in the work of such masters as Ellsworth Kelly and Donald Judd, American art has generated the most developed and perfect version of abstract art where, as the artists themselves put it, you see what you see. No more and no less. That desire for clarity and streamlining could already been seen in the splendid ambitions on which the United States was founded and which are expressed in the unparalleled Declaration of Independence. In the work of Sigmar Polke, however (this now standing for Europe), you see what you didn't yet see a minute ago and you see what you don't really see and as for what you do see, you aren't sure whether you actually see it.

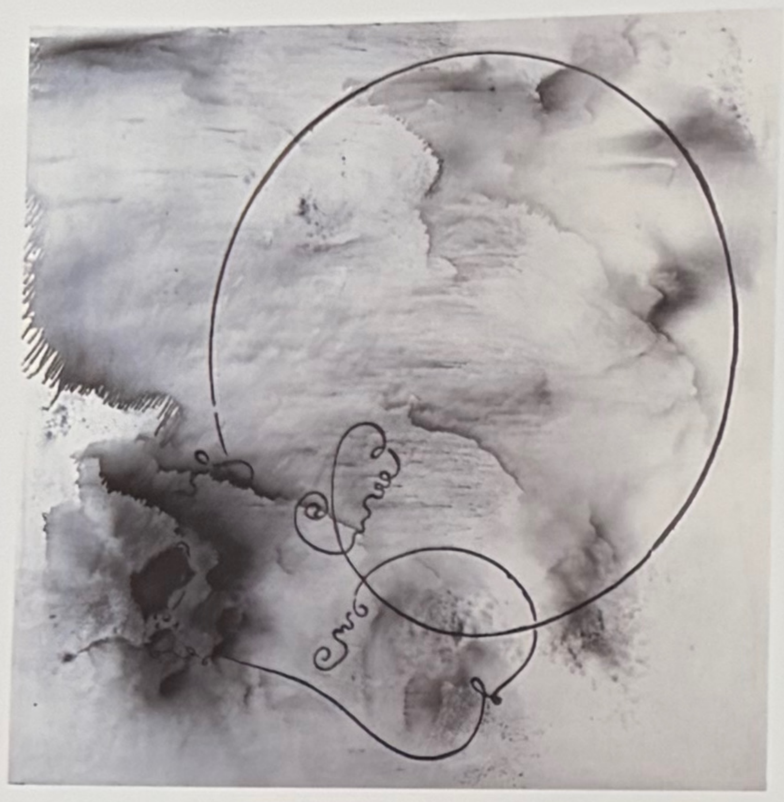
From the Dutch by Beth O'Brien

Goya (Die Alten) 1984

Hochsitz 1984

Reagan 1–3, Das Problem Europa, Sargdeckel 1981

Spiegelbilder 1986



Dürerschleifen 1986
(Ratio, Providentia, Alacritas, Velocitas und Firmitudo, Acrimonia, Virilitas, Audatia, Experientia und Solertia)

Handtücher 1994

Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité 1988

Gemeinschaftswerk Aufschwung Ost 1992

Die drei Lügen der Malerei 1994

# Early Influences, Later Consequences or: *How Did the Monkeys Get into My Work?* and other icono-biographical questions

(Fragments of a reconstructed biography as illustrated history, with a deliberate focus on the question:
*Does meaning generate relationships or do relationships generate meaning?*

The fact of my birth would have had little effect on my later work, had I not been born with a vision impairment. While it is not a severe handicap, my short-sightedness gave me access – and that at a very early age – to that raster world that was to become so important in my later work (see illustrations in this book concerning this phenomenon). Among my most painful memories is that of long winter evenings after the currency reform, our family of four huddled together in joyful anticipation over the most recent issue of BÄCKERBLUME[1], elbowing each other in the ribs and pointing out what were referred to as "delicious rolls", "seductive croissants", "honest to goodness bread", etc.; but there, where their fingers were pointing, to the accompaniment of ecstatic cries, I saw only many tiny, lifeless black dots! In despair, I pushed my way closer only to be yelled at uncomprehendingly – was my father a glazier or a doorman, perhaps?! That was a hard pill to swallow for the young boy I was at the time, but he learned! He learned that being the son of a glazier must be something special in the others' eyes, and thus from that point on it was my most fervent wish to become a glazier myself.

That wish eventually led me to begin an apprenticeship with the glass-painting company Derix (Düsseldorf), which I later terminated, however, having unexpectedly received a pair of spectacles through my father's health insurance provider.[2] Then I saw the light, which I often still do today,[3] and henceforth it ceased to bother me when others failed to see through me – which later became an advantage when people began writing about me and (against my better judgement) refused to stop doing so.

The black dots that begin to dance before my eyes whenever I see a roll – even one with something on it – are left over from that time of suffering. But my childhood had its joyful moments as well, and a discussion of these requires mention of yet another item of reading material[4] – The PALMIN ALBUM.[5]

My picture of the world was profoundly influenced by what I saw in these illustrated works, the PALMIN ALBUM and the BÄCKERBLUME, and my other pictures

1 The publication in question was the official organ of the bakers' guild, available at the shop of our neighbourhood baker Karfiol.
2 … and braces for my teeth. Although I was soon able to discard the latter, the spectacles have stayed with me into the present. Later on I also acquired a bicycle.
3 … provided it hasn't just been broken again.
4 The reader may find it strange that I mention only reading experiences when talking about my childhood and early influences, but it is in fact hardly strange at all, as due to my short-sightedness the world never appeared clearer than it did in books and pictures. Too, in books and pictures the world always remains at the distance of a ruler's length (30 cm) from the eyes, regarded unanimously by all ophthalmologists as proper, thus representing a perceptual constant even for the short-sighted – so there was at least one such in this otherwise transitory world.
5 These were heavy green albums for the pictures enclosed in Palmin wrappings. Their themes were highly diverse: starry skies, abundant South Pacific scenes, lizards too – coastlines, bridges and gigantic ocean-going vessels. And such things as tornadoes, people of

would be inconceivable without them. I owe a tremendous debt to the PALMIN ALBUM, in particular, for it inspired the studies in natural sciences that were to gain increasing significance in my work in later years (and about which more will be said here); even more importantly, however, the brand symbol of that pure coconut-oil shortening made an indelible imprint upon the sensitive adolescent mind: the palm tree. In its form and (fat) content, in its fruit and in its shape, the palm appeared to me to unite something within itself; in its combination of grace and utility it struck me as an image of – I don't know what. But I know that I loved it in the way one loves only once in life – the coconut palm.

Every fibre of my being yearned for it. My thoughts were totally coco-nutty, and I drove everyone else nuts, refusing all nourishment except coconut flakes… and then came the big crisis on Palm Sunday (the family doctor had to be called). A certain calm ensued, but only briefly, before the obsessive nights on the coconut-fibre mat began again. Soon rubbed raw all over my body, I was unable to recognise even those closest to me, calling everyone "my dear Cocoshinsky" … and finally standing for hours on end upon a coconut, naked, blue and shivering in the cold: "Polke, you must become a palm tree!" said a voice in me. To be a palm among palms – I had no other thought in mind.

But alas, it was a love without metamorphosis: never once did a leaf sprout; never was the feathered serenity of palm fronds seen on my body, nor the unperturbable fertility of its nut, nor the elastic integrity of its trunk – nothing! At last I fell off the nut and was nothing more than what I had been named: Polke.

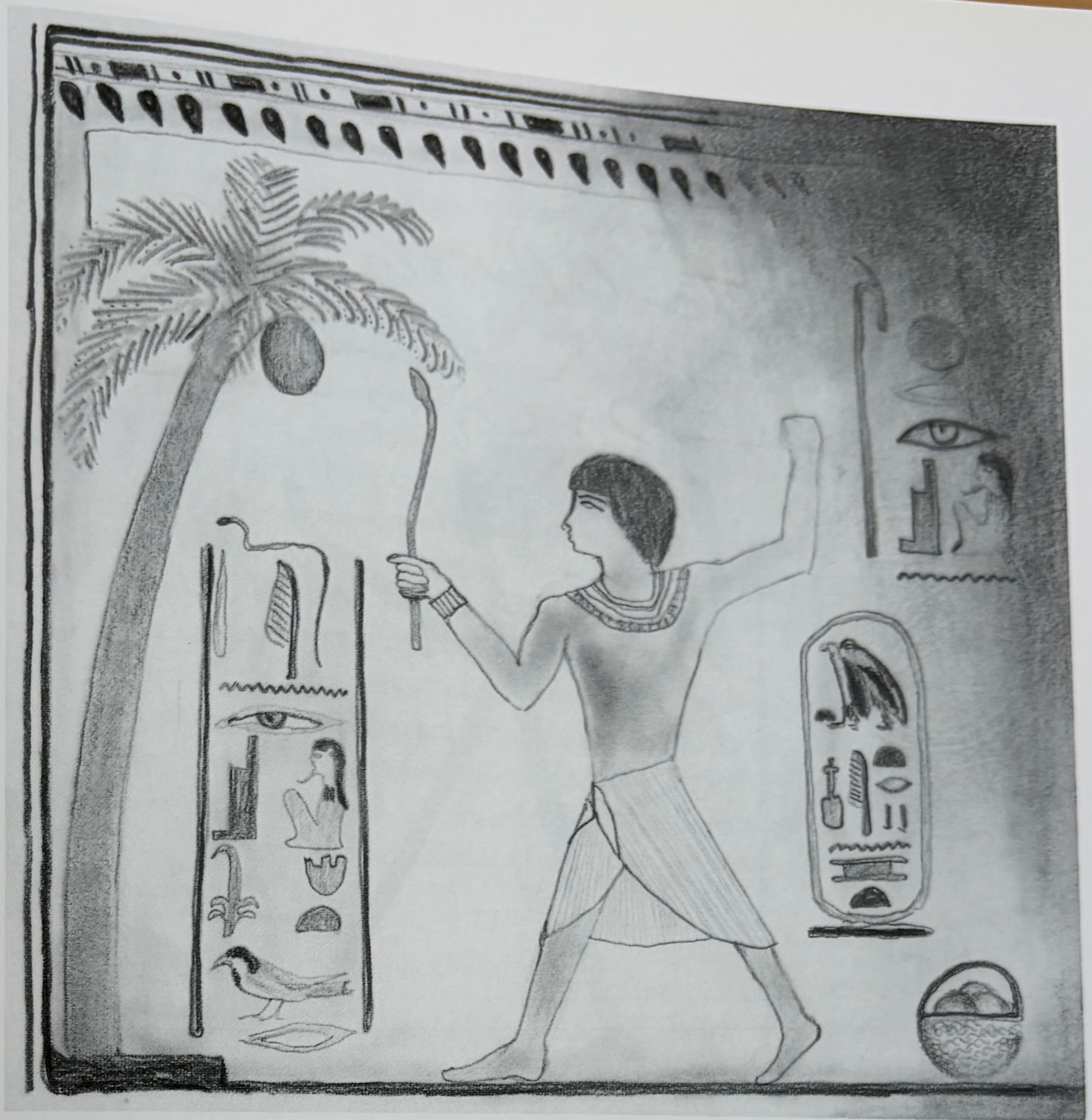
In the depths of my despair I wished only to understand what I could neither be nor possess. I wanted at least to be able to make a picture of it! And that I have succeeded in doing repeatedly, as my work demonstrates [see the relevant illustrations in this catalogue].

And thus it was that palms got into my work – and along with them the monkeys, for when I dreamed one night that I was an ape I felt very close to the palms, closer than ever before! And it was such a wonderful feeling that whenever my longing for palms broke out again I could at least derive some comfort from painting monkeys.

It was not until very much later that the profound mystery behind this fateful encounter with the palm tree, which lends it such a frightfully typical meaning, was revealed to me. Although I sensed at a very early age, albeit somewhat darkly, that I had not been named "Polke" for nothing – indeed I felt very strongly that this name signified something of great importance for my life – I never understood a bit of what it was. Not, that is, until I discovered the following illustration while browsing through a book on Egyptian Art one day.

I still do not know today exactly what it was that gripped my attention so firmly, but whatever it was put me into an unusually strong state of excitement. Suddenly it appeared clearly before my very eyes: this picture showed what stood behind the

seldom-scene cultures, lightning bolts, etc. and about every animal there was, at least the more comical ones: strange-looking moles, grotto salamanders, dodos, etc.



Illus. 1

name "Polke", which is itself merely a version of the picture in letters, as I finally and so suddenly became aware and of which Illustration 2 provides persuasive evidence.

What the name conceals in bony letters comes clearly to the fore in the picture: "Polke", was once the man – according to the translation of these Egyptian hieroglyphics – who wielded the staff and knocked the coconut from the palm tree, bringing it, concealed in a basket, to the people, and who was cursed by the palm tree to

Illus. 2

… (the text is interrupted at this point). This, as the structural anthropologist Dr. Michael Oppitz has assured me, is an early Egyptian form of the later Greek myth of Prometheus, to which it is structurally analogous, if one takes into account the sub-
sequent semiotic substitution of "cocos" with "fire", whose semantic basis we can-
not fully reconstruct today, but which nevertheless must still be alive in the popular vernacular, as is evident in the use of "kokeln" [German] for careless play with fire

(see also the term "Nußkohle").[6] Thus what first looked like a coincidental encounter with the coconut, easily explained by the caloric needs of a family of four and the advertising intent associated with a brand-name product used in cooking and frying, revealed itself to me as a deeply rooted predestination, a necessary relationship much like that involved in the Tiber's encounter with Berlioz or in the confrontation of a dive with his melody, which I have dealt with in one of my works.

Having experienced the effects of fundamental predestination in such an immediate way reinforced my conviction that everything is already sketched out in advance and that my role consists simply in completing the picture. Viewed in this way, my painting in its most fundamental nature is commissioned painting, and I flatter myself by saying that I have always worked from higher models,[7] even though I have often not been aware of them. And although many things in my work have the appearance of fantasy or imagination, everything is based upon a model and done on commission (see in this regard the illustration of the work *Höhere Wesen befahlen* [Higher Beings Commanded]).

Aside from this, experiences of this kind clearly exemplify the fact that seemingly unrelated, non-associated phenomena such as Palmin-Palme-Polke-Prometheus, etc., for example, are actually connected by highly insistant relationships, and it is this recognition that nourished the insight that was to become the credo behind my research in the natural sciences: for if we draw the unavoidable conclusions from such experiences –

a) *Nothing comes from nothing*, and

b) *What goes around comes around*,

– then it is easy to see that nothing can be done so simply – that in other words everything involves relationships! And it is also clear that a progressive scientific approach like my own can no longer concern itself with boorish causalities or self-satisfied reasons but must focus instead upon relationships, since without relationships, even causality itself might as well just pack up and leave, and every reason would be without consequence.

Thus in my scientific work I concentrated primarily upon the exploration of those relationships which genuinely bind things together, beyond their tendentious subdivision into "causes" and "effects" – which in itself is also particularly unfair,[8] as it requires causes to produce results constantly; and although they may produce whatever results they want, however they want to produce them, they never benefit from doing so at all; they remain causes forever – only the effects benefit from the process, growing bigger and bigger all the time!

This exploitation of causes by effects, and indeed this whole system of classifying things as causes and effects must come to an end! We must create a world of free and equal phenomena, a world in which things are finally allowed to form relationships

6 This mythological analysis of the name is not in conflict with that of Professor Mitzka, who explains its etymology as a combination of the Slavic words "pol/bol" (E: fame, cf. "Boleslav", E: the famous) and the diminutive ending "ke", translating it as "the (little) one who wishes to/ is to achieve fame". And isn't that what the gods accused Prometheus of – being obsessed with fame – and don't I have liver problems myself? (It is interesting to note in this context that in the history of the settlement of the Sam country (formerly East Prussia, now under Russian administration) a family named Polke is named as the founders of the town of "Palmnodding".)

7 And who really lives without a model, with the exception of those who copy their way through life. Of course, even in their own work, people of that type recognise no models other than their own cognitive afterbirths – as in the case, for example, of the overly conceptual tautologies of Kosuth, Buren et al, which do no more than indicate a point of view. They are stalwart church painters born too late, persuasively illustrating what is already affirmed in belief or thinking. And thus their works, while entirely credible and occasionally characterised by (somewhat shopworn) memorable qualities, are consistently not worth seeing: paintings for sensible blind people and others who are unable to see more than they (can) think.

8 Why – for example – is gravity always blamed when something falls? I simply do not believe that any one thing is always responsible for everything! We should look at these so-called "laws of nature" from a moral point of view once in a while. Then it would be clear how scandalous they are!

once again, relationships liberated from the bonds of servile, textbook causality and narrow-minded, finger-pointing consecution – in short, a world in which *modus barbara* is forced to give way again to *modus crinibus attrahendi* and *modus tollens* to *modus de saepe rompendi*,[9] where the obsession with relationships is finally seen for what it is: the only genuinely scientific heuristic approach, because it is entirely free of prejudice!

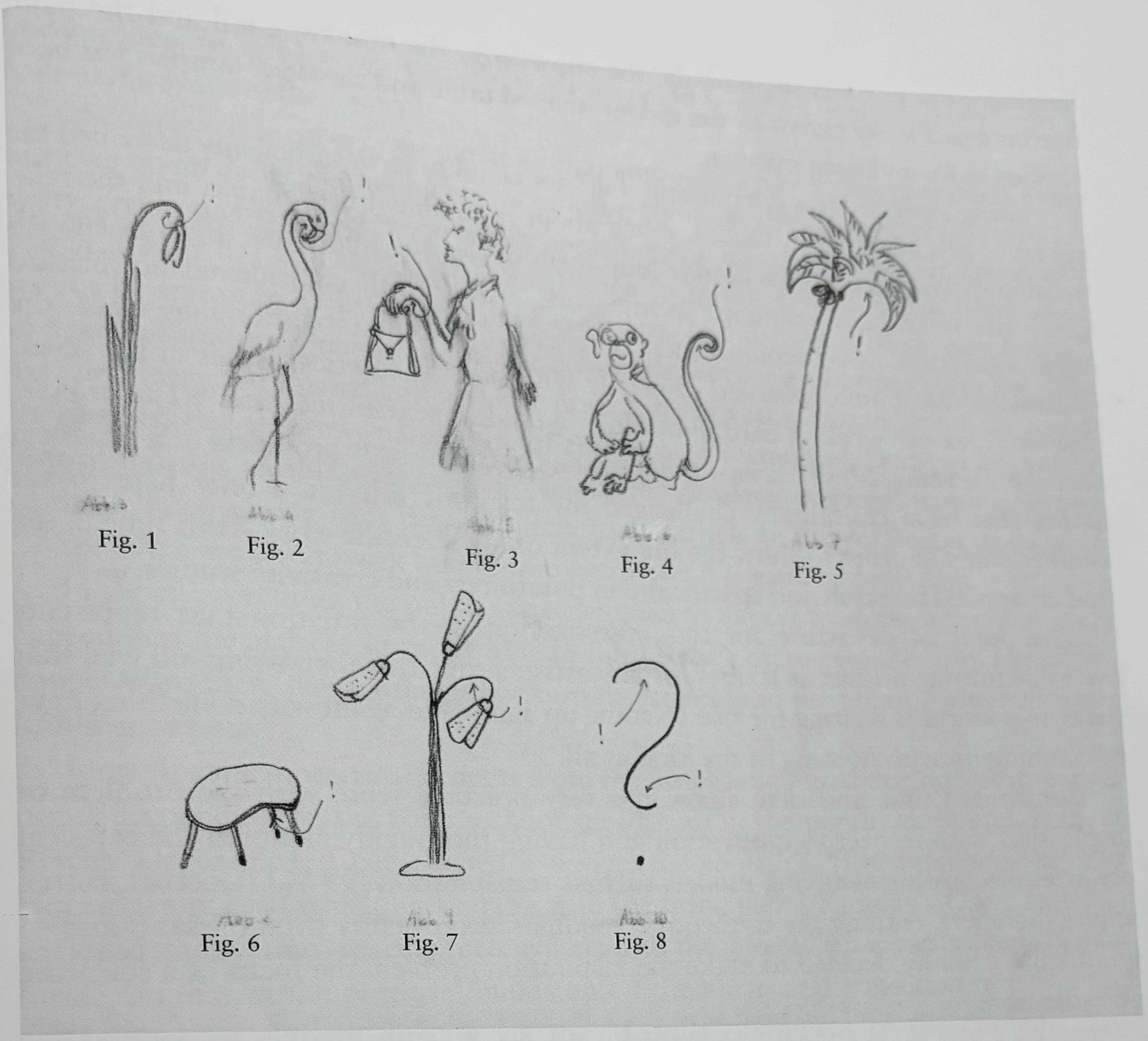
And I should be permitted to note at this point that, thanks to my tireless scientific efforts for which my paintings have already provided eloquent testimony, light has finally penetrated this world of meta-causal relationships among (within) things. Only in these relationships is it possible to find the true meaning and the true order of things – free of all causality and consecution, in which nothing more is proven than the profound need for the ornamental on the part of otherwise uninhibited intellectuals.

As much as I would like to support and expound on what has been said above on the basis of examples from my research activity, the individual investigations themselves are much too extensive and their subjects so delicate that it would be impossible to present them appropriately within the limits of this publication. Thus I am compelled to confine myself to a few points of reference here, much to my chagrin.

The fact that motifs such as flamingos, purse-swinging ladies, snowdrops, kidney-shaped coffee tables, monkeys' tails, a certain floor lamp model and palm trees are united in my pictures is neither coincidental nor arbitrary nor even the result of mindless compilation! For although the conventional wisdom of causal science would claim that none of these things has anything to do with the others, they actually entertain the closest of relationships; they belong together, without qualification and in a very essential way. Let the superficial observer find as much difference among them as he may, the alert eye for relationships senses immediately that the flamingo, the purse-swinging lady, the snowdrop, the kidney-shaped coffee table, the monkey's tail (and especially the last section of it), that particular floor lamp model and the palm tree form a morphological unity. To describe it – that is, to clarify the underlying relationship that binds these things together – was the goal of this investigation, which was demonstrably quite large in scope.

The study led to the discovery of a highly significant curve characteristic shared by all of the objects cited above: the lampion-like suspension of the snowdrop blossom (Illus. 3, Fig. 1) and the neck-and-bill inversion of the flamingo (Illus. 3, Fig. 2) describe a curve which – while it only approximates a hyperbolic function – is also readily identifiable in the arm-hand bend of the purse-swinging ladies (Illus. 3, Fig. 3), whereas the analogy of this gesture to the form of the motion of nodding palms (palm fronds) is also quite obvious (Illus. 3, Fig. 5); the tail-end configuration favoured almost unanimously by monkeys also shows similar curve characteristics (Illus. 3, Fig. 4). All in all, this curve is characterised by a high degree of vegetative stringency. Past attempts to exploit it commercially have had little success, as is evident in the

9 For those not well versed in classical logic it should be said that modus barbara (e.g. "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.") and modus tollens (e.g. "When it rains, the street is wet. If the street isn't wet, then it hasn't rained.") represent the standard wisdom of traditional causal logic, while modus crinibus atrahendi is a deduction "pulled up by the hair" and modus de saepe rompendi is a deduction "broken out of the fence". [Translator's note: These German phrases equate roughly to "far-fetched" and "fabricated out of thin air".]




Illus. 3

example of the kidney-shaped table and its stylistic compatriot, the bag-lamp model (Illus. 3, Figs. 6 and 7). These objects lack timeless inner vitality and parasympathetic qualities. In summary, one may conclude that there is a general law of vital-vegetative bending which, at work in all of the objects mentioned here, serves to emphasise their structural unity. Thus the initial hypothesis postulating a necessary relationship among these things – in other words an essential identity shared by the

flamingo, the purse-swinging lady, the snowdrop, the monkey's tail and the palm tree (and to a lesser extent by the kidney-shaped table and the floor lamp) – has been verified in a convincing manner.

Having identified this relationship, I do not claim to have sufficiently described the nature of this curve itself. Indeed, much about it remains questionable, and the relationship of this curve to the double-loop form of the question mark (Illus. 3, Fig. 8), which has often been examined in my work, is not at all coincidental but instead highly significant, as is becoming increasingly clear. This investigation may create the impression that I am concerned primarily with basic theoretical issues in my scientific work, as my work in cardboardology would appear to indicate.[10] The impression is misleading, however, as – quite to the contrary – it is problems of a practical nature that have continually challenged my scientific interest. I refer here to yet another study in order to show the full extent of my scientific work – this time in the field of applied research and specifically in potatology and creativity studies.

The point of departure for this investigation was a situation that represents everyday routine for me, as it does for any artist: sitting there, knowing full well that the whole world is waiting for one to come up again and again with something new, but coming up with nothing of the kind at all.

Confronted time and time again in a very practical sense with the problem of inspiration with respect to innovation and having thoroughly explored the classical pre-scientific problem-solving models such as transpiration (99 %) (Goethe), rotten apples (Schiller), reading the civil code (Stendhal), promiscuity (Maupassant) and so on in vain, I finally decided to make the inspiration problem the focus of a scientific investigation.

The first and most significant problem turned out to be the matter of finding a suitable object for study, as it would have to provide a sufficient and, if possible, regular frequency of innovation in order to ensure that systematic observation could take place. At first I considered engaging such prolific colleagues as, for example, Mack, Vasarely or others[11] as test persons, but in view of the problems this would probably involve I asked myself whether they were really appropriate for the purposes of my investigation – perhaps not so much because of these persons' pretensions as simply in view of the nature of the subject itself – as the experiment could just as well be performed using guinea pigs, which are known to be both highly fertile and easy to care for. Although I saw no serious obstacle to proceeding in this way, I ultimately thought better of conducting my investigation using guinea pigs, since it would surely only provide more grist for the mills of that school of art criticism based on sexual theory, à la Gorsen, or some other complicated form of masturbation.

On the verge of giving up my planned investigation in the apparent absence of a suitable object of study, I happened to go into my cellar one day, where I finally found what I had been looking for – the very incarnation of everything art critics

10 [See p. 145] The objective of these basic theoretical investigations was the formulation of a general science of cardboard, since several different studies had shown that, in contrast to the previously dominant scholarly opinion that cardboard was of significance – at best – in the creation of simple compartmented sentences, even more advanced patterns, including major cognitive constructions with no strings attached, showed marked cardboard characteristics. On the basis of this understanding, cardboardology derived fundamental insights about correlations between cognition and cartoning: – categories and cartons as the expression of one and the same need, the envelope function of concepts, the stacked structure of the boxed mind – to mention only a few key examples.

11 Today, in 1996, a list of contemporary representatives of this species would include the names of artists such as H.A. Schult or Baselitz.

and teachers imagine when they think of a spontaneously creative subject with a love of innovation: the potato!

Of course – if there is anything at all that embodies every aspect of the artist that has ever come under discussion – love of innovation, creativity, spontaneity, productivity, creation completely from within oneself, etc. – it is the potato. One need only watch it as it lies in a dark cellar and begins to sprout spontaneously, innovating sprout by sprout in a virtual torrent of creativity; and then as it disappears beneath its teeming sprouts – retreating totally behind its work – and brings forth the most amazing forms. And what colours! The practically shivering frozen lilac in the tips of its sprouts, the spaceless pale white of the sprouts themselves, with an occasional hint of morose, earthless green – and finally the timeless, maternal wrinkled brown of the self-consuming fruit that sacrifices itself entirely in the perfection of its work … Yes, what we see at work here is true creativity; it is genuine perfection!

In short: everything the public is accustomed to expect from the artist and every expectation the artist is so rarely able to fulfil – the potato provides it in overabundance! Why, then, doesn't the public turn its attention to the potato, where ultimate fulfilment awaits?

I myself gained practical benefits from the insights acquired during this investigation.[12] Expanding on the basic technologies found in the potato chest and Wilhelm Reich's Orgon Box, I constructed a device, the so-called "Kartoffelhaus" [Potato House: see p. 148] which, in keeping with the principle of Faraday's Cage, forms an enclosed innovation space protected against the effects of external field forces. Inside, an innovation potential builds up on the horizontally inserted potato which precipitates its activity directly via the *Medulla oblongata* of the contents. And I make no secret of the fact that I have the potato to thank for providing essential impulses for my work as an artist.

Before concluding this introduction to my scientific investigations I would like to outline briefly the methodological principles that underlie them. This appears necessary in view of the fact that the generally accepted opinion of my work as filled to the brim with fantasy and full of imaginative ideas ("My goodness, the things you think of – and the sensitivity you show in shaping them!" – how often have I had to listen to comments like that!) reveals a total blindness to methodological concerns and fails to recognise the strictly defined but subtle methods employed in my work. For what appears to be something I have conceived has actually felt its way inside me. In other words, it is not *I* who have conceived it; instead, it has felt its way inside me. In the same way, something that I appear to have felt my way inside has really conceived itself in me; in other words, it is not *I* who have felt my way inside it; instead, it has conceived itself in me!

This unbending law governing the complementary functions of empathy and conception, of inspiration and exploitation, which by the way has been amply demonstrated in the Berlioz-Tiber piece mentioned above and confirmed in terms of

12 Entitled "The sprouting behaviour of cellar-stored potatoes (Dutch Bintjes, Class A, primarily non-mealy) as a structural model of innovative processes" (Cologne: Interfunktionen Verlag, 1972).

input-output theory by W. Leontjev, forms the methodological basis for all of my works, elevating them above the grasp the convoluted pseudologisms of art critics who still operate with ante-diluvian explanatory concepts like fantasy, originality, creativity, etc. With this comment I wish to conclude my remarks on my life and work, in the knowledge that I have by no means answered all questions, particularly those regarding the authorship of this text.

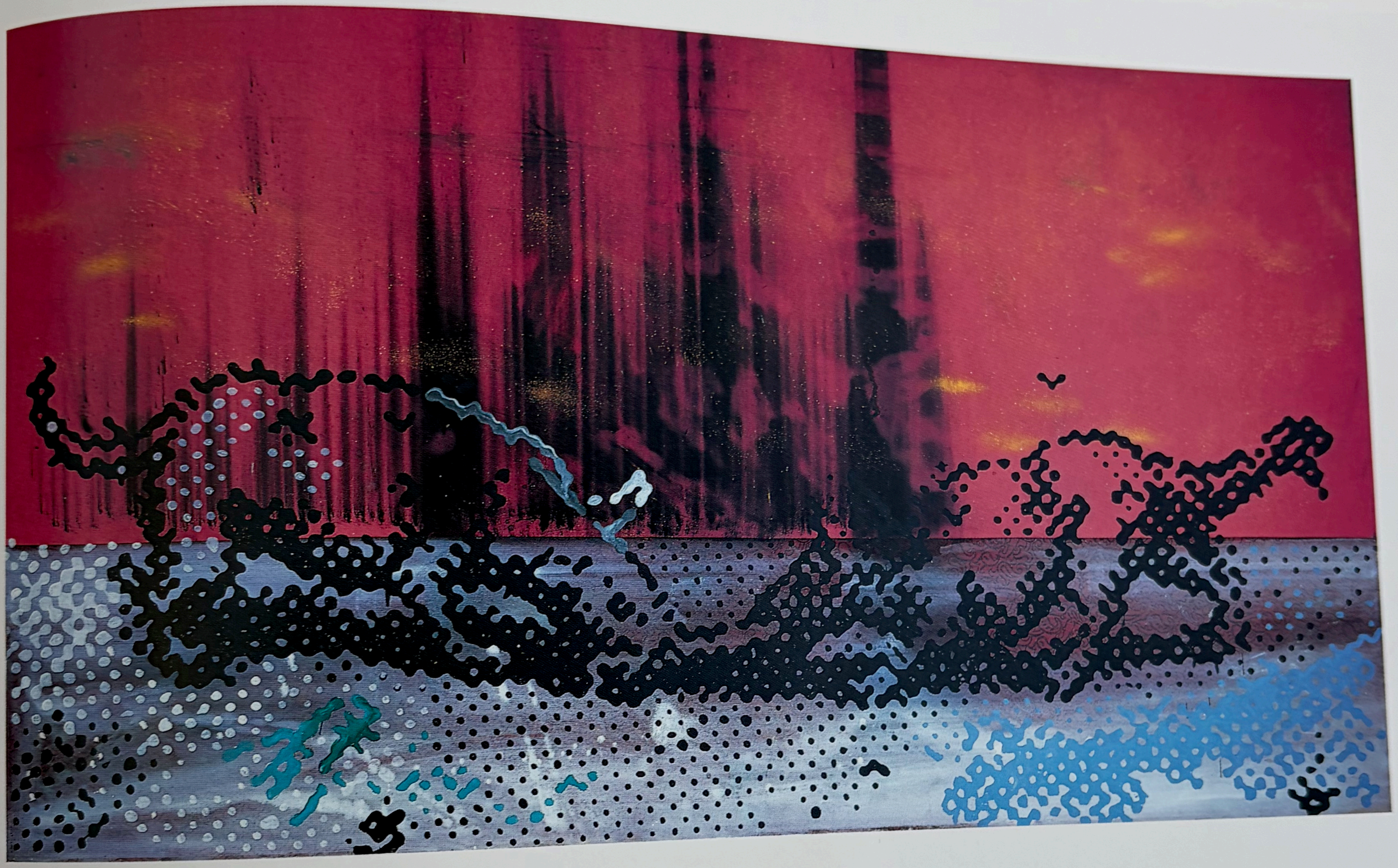
Nevertheless, I hope that in a time stripped of all positive images by narrow-minded iconoclasts these remarks may help to revive something of the old iconolatry.

From the the German by John S. Southard

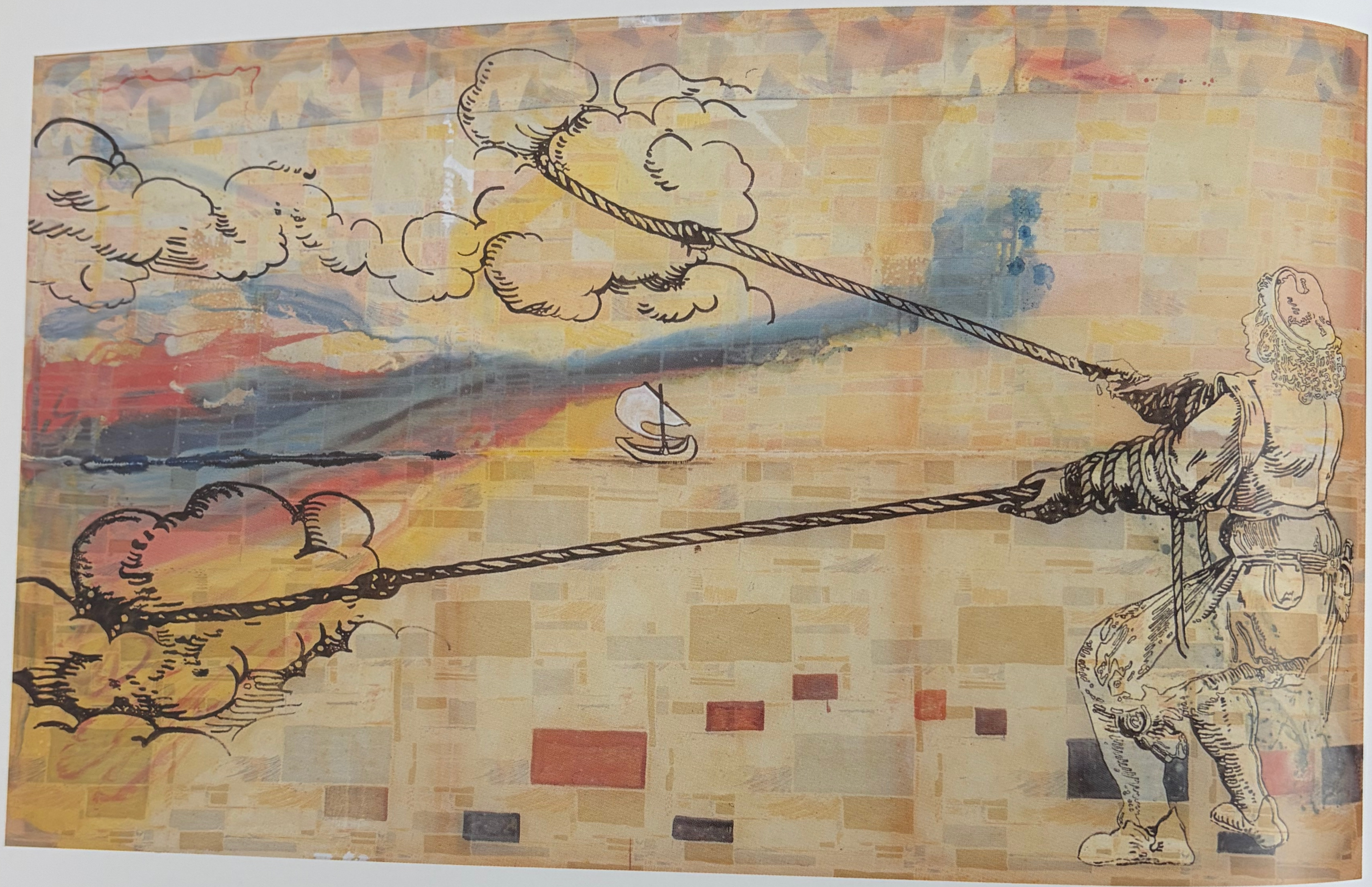
(The autobiographical material used in the preceding was compiled with the aid of an encephalophone[13] and a libidograph,[14] for the loan of which I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Fritz Heubach, Dipl. Psych.)

13 The device in question is used for the wireless recording of affections and other historical emotional states.

14 This device is employed in the written decretinisation of obsession-driven destinies and similar depressing circumstances generally known as "cruel fate".



Neid und Habgier II 1985





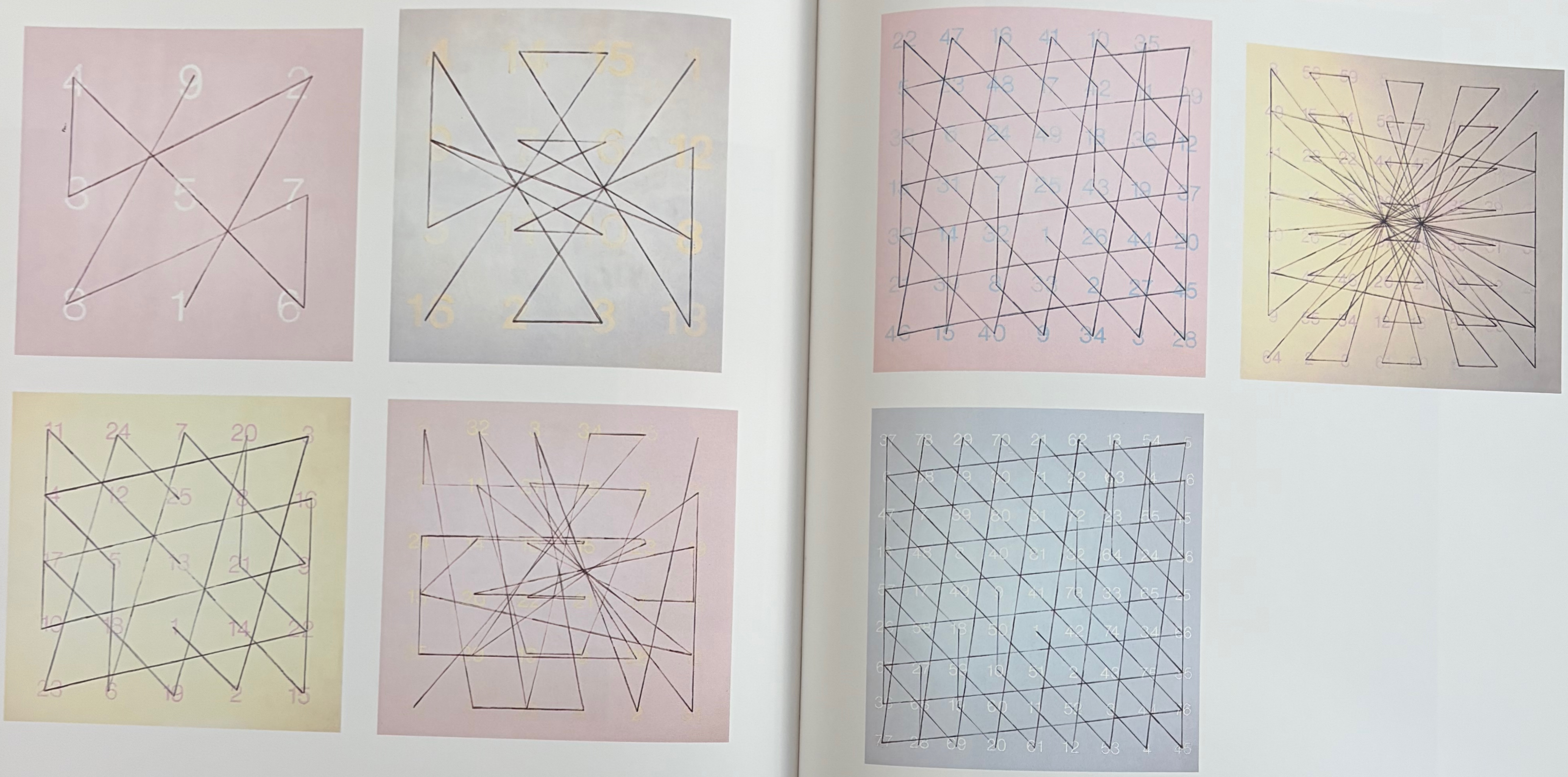
Hoffen heißt Wolken ziehen wollen 1992

Auto (Jeep) 1992

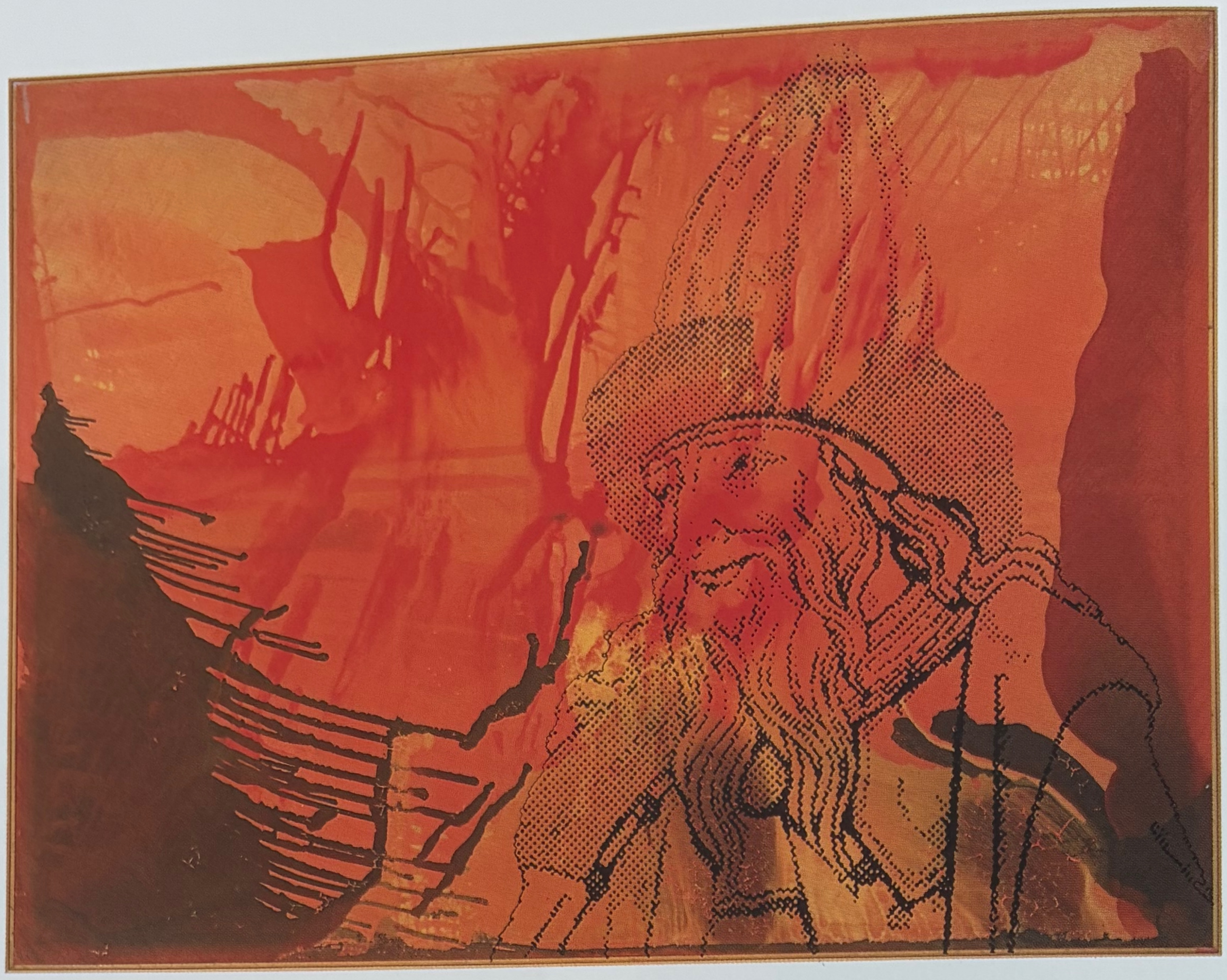
Der Ritter II 1994

Gärtner 1992

Thermodynamik 1994



Magische Quadrate I–VII 1992
(Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sonne, Venus, Merkur, Mond)



Hermes Trismegistos I–IV 1995

Laterna Magica, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1992

Laterna Magica (Die Geschichte vom Hund) 1988–92